# Town of Winter

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*To Rena*
*For What You Have Done For Me*
*And To Peach*
*Merry Christmas!*

# Author's Note

The title of this book may as well be WIP. I have changed the topic roughly four times, the last one being about a flat Earth, and serious doubts about NASA. Right so let's get that out of the way, since I've decided that I want to make a novel that is a prequel to *Oracle of Tao*.

This book instead deals with a dream that I had in the past. I was basically in a town, and well, the prologue happened. I spent the next several years trying to figure out how to work it into a coherent plot. The rest of the book is semi-autobiographical, mixing my own past with fantasy content. Hopefully, this turns out okay. Wish me luck!

In regard to names, I changed those in my immediate family, my own name, and possibly those who are here today reading this. I'll also likely change names for people who I don't remember or just omit their names. In general, if I didn't remember someone's name, I just made one up. But for the most part, they know who they are and this probably won't be too personal. Hopefully, I won't reveal anything super-embarrassing about anyone. The same was true of major companies, no large businesses were named. Much of the places I visited, people I met, and such are the same. Also, the story is not in strict chronological order, but topical order, so some events may jump forward or backwards.

I tried to keep many of the conventions from *Oracle of Tao* such as Tolkien-style capitalization of magical concepts, italicizing spells and bolding for emphasis, and the use of the word "grey" to refer to magical greyness while "gray" is for the regular color.

If anyone thinks the ending to this story is too dark, I would say that my intention writing this was "a proper ending to *Romeo and Juliet*" and leave it at that. The point being that romance stories have tragic endings, but it doesn't mean the story necessarily ends. Also, this ending was required to be dark because these characters were doomed by the canon of *Oracle of Tao*. But yes, it is dark. Oh yes, and even expanding the size, I managed to have a short book, so I added a bonus book.

# Prologue
## AMBROSIA

Belial had at last been defeated. His body had been pulverized to an evil spirit and a bag of bones, and then the spirit had been drained of its potency. "**Yay!** He's dead!" I shouted with joy. All of a sudden though, I felt something weird. You know, you're watching a movie and there's something scratched up with the video and it skips? Anyway, that's what seemed to happen, there was a sort of ripple, and the villain disappeared from stage like a frame stopping. "What just happened? Guys, what do you think...?" I looked around. Nevras was gone too. So were the others. "Guys??? What happened? You're... gone. Why?" And then everything fell apart.

The space around me fell away completely leaving only openness. Where before there were walls and ceilings, chandeliers, and other things, now there was only white empty space. I looked around, and saw the floating triangular form of God. *I believe I can answer that*, God said to me. As I watched however, the recognized form of God fell away, and I stared at my own face, identical except for clothing. This version of me carried a long robe and a stylized staff tipped with the Trinity symbol. "Or, should I say," she said in actual words, "I believe I can."

I guess I kinda shrugged it off. "You're me? But..." I sighed, "Oh, nevermind. After evil twins, nothing surprises

me anymore.” Then God shrugged, “You should be at least a **little** surprised. After all, this will be hard to take at first. You've heard, I gather, about the First Oracle?”

Yeah, I'd heard the legends, “Of course. The Oracle completed his training and then went off to face Belial, but he disappeared and...”

THE DREAM

Alethea woke up from her bed with a start. The town she was living in was known as the town of Winter. It was so named for very obvious reasons. A curse of some sort had locked the town in a single season. While other towns had summer, spring, and fall, Winter had... well, you guessed it. The time in this town was frozen, so seasons didn't change.

Winter was not actually in a cold climate. It was in the same latitude as one might find Virginia in the US, rather than somewhere in Maine. So while snow storms were a regular occurrence there, they weren't the intensity of some area up north. Not that there was a Maine, or even a Virginia. Everything about this land screamed "fantasy world." Well, sort of. The houses were something straight out of a Thomas Kinkade painting, quaint houses surrounded by spruce trees, with lights inside and smoke spewing from the chimney, a gentle stream nearby, and deer that posed for the painting. Roads connected a series of similar quaint houses, until at last the town ended near a harbor and a bridge. All that could ruin this picture was that this town wasn't a charming painting of light, but more of a sepia tone.

And then there was the magic, what was at this time called thaumaturgy. Later on, magic came from a more corrupt source (when it was called magic). Still later, it was further corrupted into necromancy and sorcery. But here, this was before all of that. This was when the thaumaturgy was pure and undefiled. The light inside the house at any other era could have been from the fire or from electricity, but it wasn't either. These were the power of runes.

Before recorded history, and well after it (as would later be called the New Earth), human beings were able to access particles of energy that floated in the air. These were discovered well before such a term as "atom" was coined, but they behaved much like atoms, able to divide themselves and release energy, or merge with others in the same was as oxygen could couple with other atoms to make carbon dioxide. But the reactions when these were put together were much closer to bringing about heat or cold seemingly from nothing. Magic followed the laws of physics, sort of.

This older world had laws of its own, just as it had its own history and even its own language. The town was Winter in the English language, but the sign to the town read . This was a land that predated even ancient Egypt and Babylon, a land that was just as modern by its own magical advances as the 20th and 21st centuries were. But even a dreamer could tell. Winter's days were numbered.

Alethea was still a child, so she knew little of all of this, but she did know about the magical world, as much as most

of the people in this town. To start with, they were living in a town under a curse. Two hundred years ago, an angry witch had cast it in order to torture a man who cheated on her. It didn't work out like she'd liked, but she'd used all her power making it permanent, she couldn't exactly withdraw it easily. It was bound to a bracelet she stuck on the man, but the man was now a bartender loved by all, while the witch was a malingerer living alone on the edge of the town. Alethea visited her sometimes when she was bored.

Also, Alethea routinely interacted in this town with the likes of dragons, goblins, and angels. Her friends were a dryad named Arboria, a gnome named Autumntwig, an elf named Aellisa, a mermaid named Marina, and a kitsune named Renata. But everyone called her Rena, which was similar to the word for "fox." Likewise, many people called her Alicia because it was easier to say than Alethea.

Now Rena was her best friend, who she met with every day, to explore their backyards and play games. They talked for hours about life outside the town, or about anything really. But right now, Alethea had more pressing concerns. It was night rather than morning. What woke her up with a start was not the sun but a series of crimson flames off in the distance. "Brimstone," her father said. She didn't know what to make of this until he announced, "Demons."

Alethea's father was a priest and her mother was a teacher. But those things meant something entirely different in this world than the modern one. A teacher didn't just teach

reading and math, but the thaumaturgy. What many would in the future call "magic" was originally the thaumaturgy. And both of her parents were experts at it. Alethea's father, as a priest, had power enough to slay most demons. Which was probably good, if they ever came to this town.

At that, Alethea was shocked. "Are you sure?" she asked. Her father nodded, "There are only a few causes of this brimstone smell. The first is if God is going to rain down judgement upon us. The second is if we're near a sulfur mine or sulfur spring. But neither of those make sense here. Dear, put Alethea in the basement for shelter." Her mom rushed to obey, but the girl objected, "What if I get trapped in the house, and it gets burned down with me?!?"

Her parents sighed. They realized that they weren't any safer in home than outdoors and the three of them left the house. Her mother explained to her the importance of keeping close to strong spellcasters for safety, but warned her that the two of them would likely be far too close to the action. She asked, "Why don't you go hang out with your friends, Alethea? I trust them to keep you safe." Many townspeople had likewise left their home, huddling in family units or with their friends to avoid crowding too much and giving the demons an easy target. Well, those who hadn't decided it was safer at home, and had their houses burned down with them in it. Some of these people went to help fight the demons, while others decided to stay back.

Her father and mother were in the thick of spiritual warfare

against demon kind. They had just defeated several minor demons in the span of a few seconds, and were about to use their thaumaturgy against some more. The demons breathed hellfire at them, only to have them guard with barriers of thaumaturgy and parry with blessed objects, then launch into a counterattack. Hellfire was nothing to mess with, but they deflected it as easily as if it was a regular attack.

Demons had attacked this town before, but her mom and dad were considered heroes because they singlehandedly fought off a scouting unit that time. They were just a schoolteacher and a priest in Alethea's mind, but everyone respected them. But now they dealt with an entire army, led by a greater demon.

Now, there are two types of thaumaturgy, miracles and prayers. Miracles are passive, a product of grace itself. With a prayer you ask for an effect, and it happens. Unlike modern day prayer, the people of this age could always count on their prayers being answered, though miracles seemed to be entirely at the whim of God. In addition to there being two types of thaumaturgy, there were two ways to cast it. For instance, the thaumaturgy they were currently using was called Holy Cross. Either they could simply shout, "*Holy Cross*!" or they could recite a longer prayer that was something like, "*May evil be driven back to where it came from, by the divine grace of the redeeming cross. Holy Cross*!" And yes, the people of this land knew what a cross was and what it stood for. Christ may have died once for all,

but there was an entire hidden history about him which modern people knew nothing about.

Anyway, the general rule was that longer prayers were much more powerful, but there was a greater risk of being wide open to attack. For this reason, two people were typically paired in such combat. One was to provide cover with quick prayers, while another would take their time with the bigger effects. Her father chose the role of providing cover, not because his wife was a stronger user, though she did know more thaumaturgy, he was actually stronger due to his religious background. No, his real reason was because he deeply cared for her, and couldn't risk any harm coming to her. His strong feelings became a well of strength, as he summoned forth Holy Cross, Divine Shield, Sacred Arrow, and many others in rapid succession. She recited the words, "*May light that is beyond all other lights surround me, removing evil from nearby. That all that seeks us harm be removed from my sight. Exorcising Aura*!" At once, a large dome expanded all about her, turning the demons within a 30 foot diameter to bones, then turning those bones into dust. She appeared winded, but after a few deep breaths, she was ready to start again.

The demons were sneaky creatures, so they tried a flank attack. They kept the two distracted with a large force of smaller demons, while two larger demons snuck around the buildings. "Look out!" her father called to his wife. She turned around, scared as much for her own safety as she was

at the prospect of leaving her daughter without her mother. She had no thaumaturgy prepared as she was caught completely off-guard, and he wasn't in a clear line of sight to defend her. The demons might have made a snack of her, but that the creepy old witch called out the words, "*Solomon's Temple*" in a raspy voice. A large pillar of light covered the two demons as they screamed and disintegrated, freeing the couple to focus on those in front of them. Other townspeople got into position. Just as if there had been a fire, everyone lined up to perform a task. Some guarded the rear, some assisted her parents, and some fought different groups of demons in other sections of the town. Different people united out of loyalty to their home.

Alethea quickly found her friends while her parents fought. Alethea's friends were quite powerful. Alethea had currently not learned to actively use her thaumaturgy, but her friends were more than capable of defending her. More important than their power though, was their sense of teamwork. Alethea joined her friends in everything from sledding to sleepovers. It was difficult to explain how they got to be friends, though, as Alethea was a human and her friends all weren't. But it was a question that could be answered more by chemistry than biology. Alethea was close to her friend Renata, and all of Rena's friends respected and deferred to her. Over time, these friends of Rena became Alethea's friends. Here, where demons were pouring in, things like a community and having friends mattered. It was the power of friendship that you could trust with your life.

Her friends could use powers of sorts too, but they were more like racial abilities than thaumaturgy. Marina as a mermaid could use water and song abilities; all elves had natural abilities of geomancy, perfect physical ability, and invisibility, so Aellisa had them too; Autumntwig had mastery over earth and illusion; and Arboria could do things like teleporting through trees, summoning vines or leaves, and so on. As for Rena, she had the nine powers of a gumiho (fire, illusion, shapeshifting, telepathy, telekinesis, luck, protection, light, and time).

However, demons are relatively hard to destroy. While radiant energy and blessed weapons could dispense with them, most other types of damage had trouble getting through their thick skin. While her friends were quite powerful, Rena hadn't really mastered her light powers yet, so none of them were very effective. Alethea would have been scared, except for the fact that they excelled at defensive abilities. Compared to them, she felt helpless with no prayers to use.

The tide of the battle began to turn. Demons are quite weak to holy power, and they indeed were falling in great numbers. But their numbers were nothing to sneeze at, and they have sharp fingernails, horns, and pointed tails. One of them caught her father off guard, giving him a nasty slash in the leg. This in turn broke her mother's concentration, and she stopped praying. She rushed to her husband, but the demons were swarming in. "No!" Alethea screamed, "Noooooooooooooo!!!!" Alethea had passive protective

effects on her because she was a child, but when she screamed something changed.

In the background of the town, snow was falling, specks of white on the backdrop of evergreen trees and wooden houses. And then, the scene faded to white, and the dream ended.

## Chapter 1: Awaken

### EMETT

I awoke from the dream. It's funny, even though it was happening in a sort of remote third person, and the main character in the dream was a girl, I felt like it happened to me. Part of it was definitely that it was so incredibly vivid and real, that there was a distinct sense of immersion. There was also the fact that our names were etymologically related. Both Alethea and Emett referred to the word "truth." As an amateur linguist and general scholar, I got this significance right away. But I expected other people not to, so maybe it was just a coincidence. In any case, since I had no idea if it was supposed to mean something, I ignored it and got myself out of bed. After all, the town seemed to have rules of physics to it that weren't true of any town that I knew of.

I was around eighteen this year. I have a father named Alex, a mother named Bianca, a brother named Ash (like the tree, he insists, not like soot after things are burned), and a sister named Willow (this was before *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* became a television series). I was spending a vacation with my parents, as it was now July. Many people at my age couldn't wait to move away, starting on work in order to

become independent and pay for their own college, or skipping it entirely and going straight to work. I wasn't most people. I loved my parents, and always felt off-sync with the rush of the rest of the world. Despite being fascinated by several subjects of study for their own sake, everyone else seemed to know something about the world that didn't make any sense to me. Or maybe they just believed something to be obvious, that just wasn't true to me.

I guess I was always a little strange, even as a child. I was born in Sharon CT, but we moved when I was four to Virginia. From there, we moved every few years due to my father's job as a priest, but always within Virginia. I was always a religious child. I used to pray for the weirdest things, and not like a normal child might. One time, I prayed simply because the amount of time it took to say the prayer would be enough to cool food down. And sure enough, once the prayer was done, it was indeed stone cold. It wasn't my words that cooled it down, that was for certain. But my feelings on the other hand, I discovered later, had a powerful effect on reality. At the time, I didn't know any of this. What I did know was that growing up, I always felt like I had weird senses. I could always seem to know when it was going to rain by a sort of feeling, and I seemed to be very good with animals. Outside my back door, a forested hill emptied out into a dock. I always had all sorts of outdoor adventures growing up.

But lest you think that I was some wild hippie child that

never got a decent education, let me dissuade you of this. I read encyclopedias growing up. I learned that the tallest waterfall was Angel Falls and the deepest part of the ocean was the Mariana Trench. Or was, before the Mandela Effect. After that, everything including the name of the *Berenstein Bears* was fair game. But I would eventually learn about that too. I learned about biology, physics, algebra, and all the rest in school, for I got a normal education. It was my extracurricular activities that tended to be strange. These were things like inventing languages (everything from some sort of squiggles, to pictographs of trees or snowflakes), coming up with different systems of government, or imagining what happened before recorded history. I always wondered why I had such hobbies.

When I had friends, these were mostly normal. I would play video games, go to sleepovers, and watch anime with friends. As a kid, I had a friend named Kyle growing up. Later on, I had another friend named Charlie. No matter who I met, it always felt like I had the same five or so people that I hung out with, or rather all of the friends I ever met fell into one of five archetypes. For some reason, I pictured them as five girls named much like that dream. The one I dubbed Autumntwig was athletic and into the outdoors with a friendly and outgoing manner, the one I called Aellisa was always tagging along with the first friend but seemed more prim and aloof, the one I called Arboria was very calm and almost bookish, the one I called Marina was very clean and organized, and Rena was incredibly approachable and usually

my dearest friend at the time.

I made friends of both sexes, but I seemed to be better relating to girls than boys. I thought there was something wrong with me, but my father Alexander tells me that he once walked in on a daycare where the ladies there were telling everyone that men were all savages, and women were all angels. Needless to say, he switched daycare after that, but even though it was a repressed memory, I always felt more like I had interests in common with other girls.

Later on, things got weirder. My brother Ash decided to crossdress me for this play about some historical figure, and these feelings of belonging more with girls than boys really cemented. I wondered if I was gay, but I decided after some soul-searching that this wasn't really so. I liked girls, as much due to being attracted to pretty things and people and being grossed out by things like body hair and body odor, but also because all things boyish turned me off. I wasn't gay, but I didn't understand what I was. So I hid this, until I was nearly thirty. As such, dating was filled with awkwardness because I really wanted to be close friends rather than romantic, but I had awkward hormones and even more awkward social norms about behavior around the opposite sex. That is, I couldn't just hug a girl I wasn't dating. Nevermind that as a child, that had been just fine.

We moved away from my old home, into a small city. I went from having a few friends from school that I regularly hung out with to knowing practically nobody. I met people

mainly through church from there on, as I was simply too shy after the sudden move. Little did I know that the trouble was about to start.

## Chapter 2: Valentine

### EMETT

When I was in my first home (after Sharon CT, which I only have dim dream memories of leaving at around age four), we attended church. While this was the source of most of my friends, it also provided the first source of my perfectionism. Over and over again, as an acolyte, I was taught that candles be lit just so, starting from the right and working left to light, then starting from the left and working right to snuff. Had I been calm, this would have been easy to learn, but instead I fixated on doing it right. And in turn, I fixated from then on in doing everything right. I didn't want to be lectured or screamed at.

So when I moved to my new house, I wanted to not show any new friends any weakness. But it wound up that I didn't show them much of anything. I lost the ability to connect normally in conversation, so fixated was I with not appearing nervous or lonely. After watching a play called *The Foreigner*, I started acting weird, speaking in strange languages. What? I was a dumb teenager trying desperately to hide my own insecurities and make new friends. Of course I would go about it completely the wrong way.

Bullies are also lonely. So when they see a kid who looks lonely and an outcast, having poor skills to belong

themselves, they tend to tease them. I was bullied by a kid named Frank. It was a religious private school so there was a limit to the actual physical bullying I got, but there was a lot of teasing. And not just from him, but from some of the other kids. There was Meredith, Allison, and Meredith's friends, Candice and Eva. While Meredith's friends didn't bully me much, I had a crush on Meredith. With her lean figure and red hair, I confused my crush for true love, and thought Meredith loved me back. Meredith had a very neat and organized personality, and didn't feel that way towards me, a grungy teen who hadn't yet mastered hygiene beyond showering. Somehow, I got invited to a party where I played spin the bottle, and got my only kiss for the next twenty years. Unfortunately, she commented behind my back when I was standing nearby about how at the time I had Cheetos on my lips and my mouth was really moist and gross. My second kiss, for the record, didn't go much better. Within a week of seeing that girl, the entire thing blew up. But that's a story for later.

I also had a crush on Allison, an athletic but slightly aloof girl who was forever running in track meets. She wasn't mean like Meredith, but there was a sense where she completely didn't understand my attraction. Such a person by later terms might be called an asexual person, but there was no such term those days. I at no point saw her interested in anyone else, so I can safely say that she wasn't just more interested in someone else, but in fact was not into anyone at all. But being a dumb teenager, I made the mistake of blurting out my

affections of both of them while they were in earshot, and that I had "difficulty deciding between them." Needless to say, between awkward situations with the opposite sex, bullying from Frank, and just general confusion about how to talk normally to other people, I was having a miserable first few years of high school.

My brother and sister also kinda messed with me (I typically wrestled with my brother Ash while my sister Willow watched and commented on this), but they didn't really bully me like Frank. It was more a good-natured exercise. Although, there was one time when my brother had played some kung fu game, and afterwards was trying out moves on me. I freaked out, and backed up, right into a tree root, breaking or twisting my leg. I was in a cast for months, and was held back a year, so I met different friends for my first year of elementary. I think he blamed himself for this, so his fighting never again was serious to the point of being bullying. But it got worse. While Frank didn't seriously bully me and my brother was feeling too guilty to, an older man who was part of our church, and a bit goofy decided to bully me a bit. It was mostly teasing, but one time he wrestled me to the ground and tried to tell me, "Say you love Hanson! Say you love Hanson!!!" Hanson, of course, being a boy band where all members looked slightly like girls, and sang the smash hit MMMBop. I sternly refused, screaming, "I will **never** love Hanson!!!" To this very day, I think Hanson as a band is absurd at best, but now have a friend who sometimes plays YouTube videos of Hanson, because

he's a bit of a troll. I will never love Hanson.

I dealt with this teasing and bullying for years, basically going to school, then going home and doing homework and then watching anime or playing video games. I had no friends, and it was starting to wear on my nerves. Then something changed, and things began to get better.

It started because of Willow. My dear sister saw what I was going through and basically bribed me. Noting Meredith and her two friends, she decided that Candice was probably the most down to earth and approachable. Her friend Eva, if I'm being honest now, was a bit like my brother. Down to earth like Candice (I'll say one thing for Meredith, she had pretty level friends), yet coarse to the point of being almost mannish.  Eva was a dairy farmer's daughter, and kind of odd. So my sister told me, "If you talk on the phone to Candice for awhile, no being weird, I'll treat you to ice cream." I don't actually remember the ice cream, but I do remember eventually learning to be somewhat normal in terms of conversations again. And I remember talking to Candice normally from then on. After that, high school life went from being a fragment of hell to something actually nice. I had one friend. Even Frank started treating me better, it seemed.

As I got to know Candice, I discovered that unlike her friends who were odd in retrospect (Eva aside from being kinda a farm girl was blond with cow-like breasts, Meredith struck me as being flighty and I could never figure out how she had ended up with her friends), Candice was odd when I

knew her. She told everyone she was dating a Mr Rutherford, who nobody ever saw. Like me, she had built a persona. I remember her also singing at one point.

*My funny valentine, sweet comic valentine*
*You make me smile with my heart*
*Your looks are laughable*
*Unphotographable*
*Yet you're my favorite work of art*

*Is your figure less than Greek*
*Is your mouth a little weak*
*When you open it to speak*
*Are you smart?*

*But don't change a hair for me*
*Not if you care for me*
*Stay, little valentine, stay*
*Each day is Valentine's Day*

*Is your figure less than Greek*
*Is your mouth a little weak*
*When you open it to speak*
*Are you smart?*

*But don't change a hair for me*
*Not if you care for me*
*Stay, little valentine, stay*
*Each day is Valentine's Day*

She was heavier than Meredith by about thirty pounds, but with a cute face, and soft chocolate brown hair with reddish highlights (supposedly before I had met her, she had come from California and had totally flat blonde hair, but I think Meredith helped her out with her style a bit before I knew her). Something about all of this was endearing rather than repulsive. I didn't see a sort of crazy gal, but I saw someone who was dealing with much the same insecurities as I was, someone who I could talk about anything with. She was indeed my funny valentine, and the first time that I felt in love and loved back, rather than simply subject to a crush and crushed back.

Near graduation, I danced with Candice. And I actually enjoyed it. She wore a silvery white dress if I remember correctly (and I don't) with heels and the whole look flattered her figure and made me forget my vain fixation with appearance and the fact that she was heavier than her friend. All those curves went in just the right places, and the dress itself turned me on for reasons subconsciously having to do with my own past with crossdressing but consciously about her looking that good in it. As we danced, I wanted her to lead, but she thought I should be a man and take the lead when I also didn't know what I was doing. So the dance wound up a bit like the first meeting of Squall and Rinoa in *Final Fantasy VIII*. If you don't get the reference, the two of them wound up crashing into other dancers and stepping on each other's feet before finally being among the better dancers. It was awkward, but I shall not forget that night.

And then, I graduated and never saw any of them again. Except Frank, who I met again in college. But nevermind that.

## Chapter 3: High School

### EMETT

I have trouble with my memories. Like most people, I remember little of my life before about age four or so. Apparently, I lived in Sharon, met two girls named Sasha and Alissa who teased me, and a boy named Kyle who was my best friend. I also had a grandmother on my mother's side, who I played games with and who I so connected with that when she died, I had to go into therapy. That, plus numerous incidents where I bumped my head at the low ceiling of the same cottage that I talked about at age eighteen, and for the most part my memories well past four and into about age nine are a jumbled mess much of which I can't remember. Though there is something else. At our first house, there was a closet in the basement that I sort of feared. It wasn't that it was dark (though it was), but that absolutely *shouldn't* be closed. This, combined with a fear of being touched on the back or shoulder (and of intimacy in general) made me think that maybe at one point I was locked in that room and molested. But like Joe Biden sniffing hair and touching shoulders and getting away with it on national television, I found it quite difficult or impossible to prove, so that meant the awful molester got away with it. Joe Biden, I mean.

Thanks to this, people and places began to run together

strangely. For instance, I sometimes conflate moving to junior high school, high school, and college. It didn't help that we moved around quite a bit, or that the last year of high school was merged with community college before going to a proper college. So if I mentioned all of this as high school, I think it was actually junior high that I met Meredith, Candice, and Frank.

In actual high school, not the one I have mixed up, I met this punk/goth girl named Cecelia and some other girl named Austin. I later met Austin of all places on a tour of the UK and Ireland with my parents. Here we were, having crossed a rope bridge and in a hotel near the coast overlooking Scotland, and I saw this girl from high school there.

There was also a girl named Renee, and a French teacher who I was kind of sweet on. She always used to show us the strangest movies. One of these was a two-film series called *Jean de Florette* and *Manon of the Spring*. The first film had an uncle and nephew cheat a hunchbacked man out of his property by blocking the water with cement, so they could grow carnations. As a result of the hunchback, the land is later covered with rabbits as well. His daughter Manon, the little girl from the first film becomes a hottie ten years later, and roams wild in the forests and springs. The nephew falls in lust with her, even sewing a ribbon in his hair into his flesh (like I say, weird movie), which eventually kills him. The old man despairs of having any legacy now that his nephew is dead. She and some visitor to town plot to undo the uncle,

and fall for each other in the process. Meanwhile, while the uncle is dying of old age, he finds out from an old woman that an old flame of his got pregnant with his child and had a hunchback, making Manon actually his granddaughter. And so, despite the fact that his granddaughter hates him, he dies secure that she will watch over things after he is gone. The teacher's oddness reminded me of Candice and immediately attracted me, even though she didn't look at all alike. This teacher was petite and thin with medium-length blond hair and a youthful appearance. One day, I shared the film *Brazil* with the teacher, a dystopian story of a man living in an overly bureaucratic society who eventually "won" against the dystopia by focusing on his beloved and forgetting about reality.

In the last year of high school, we moved to the Eastern Shore of Virginia, so I lost touch with most of my friends from there, but I took courses that transferred over to high school and thus was able to visit my friends the last year when I graduated. As for me, I spent a couple of years around the community college, hanging out with a girl named Nina. She was I guess I'd put it, kind of a Hispanic version of my junior high flame. She was short and curvy but with dark hair and glasses. Although one time, she dressed as a devil, with makeup and a cute red dress of some sort and wore contacts instead of glasses. Unfortunately for me, a real demon of sorts was to enter my life.

# Chapter 4: Demons

## EMETT

So anyway, we're back to the dream I mentioned. I had this dream just around community college during summer break, and I wondered what it meant. By this time, I had developed a sort of affinity for element of wind. I had just come up with a religion after being stuck almost overnight after a field trip to an aquarium. I had overslept, and decided to drive there myself. I got separated from the bus, and then wound up having to find the place myself. On the way back, I got separated again, this time because I didn't want to pay the toll. So I was stuck in town of Baltimore, since apparently there were only a few ways out of the area. Depressed, I considered driving my car into a wall, as I felt like there was no way I'd get back home. I honestly don't understand how I was thinking back then, but I remember feeling a well of determination after that, and made my religion based from the sense of finding meaning where none should exist.

So unlike most of the world that didn't believe in magic, I strongly considered it a possibility. After all, writers that wrote fantasy novels were obviously writing what they knew. Clearly they were drawing either from alternate realities where magic existed, or they themselves had limited experience with magic themselves. In any case, I was able to adjust my body temperature slightly, somewhat affect the wind from not breezy at all to sorta breezy, and I had a limited sense of where other people were, which I thereafter

called the "heart sense". It wasn't like I could make fireballs or throw giant boulders around with my mind though. In fact, my mind didn't actually enter into the equation. It was feelings that did this.

I suppose I can't talk about what happened next without being "culturally insensitive." On September 11, 2001, the day that I was supposed to take a chemistry test, some monstrous assholes flew a plane into the World Trade Center, and we also headed from several other targets if they hadn't been stopped.

Anyway, I got past that, and took my test. But the world wasn't really the same. This was the day that dream sorta came true. This was the day that the demons attacked my home town. Well, in a manner of speaking anyway.

Over the next several years, things got worse. Under the banner of "hope" and "change", the country in general was filled with high taxes. I had never really thought of the world in terms of black and white, good and evil. To my line of thought, there weren't good *or* evil people, all people were good *and* evil. So the idea that a man supposedly elected to fight "racism" was to me an alien concept. Even more alien was the seemingly punitive healthcare laws. On the pretext of dealing with "pre-existing conditions" my healthcare went from a PPO family plan which at my end cost me only $40 to basically an HMO which covered nothing until I paid nearly $11.5 thousand, and was expected to cost $440 monthly if I read correctly. I didn't care to find out, but went straight to

the insurance people and asked them to cancel me from insurance. I then tried to get exempted from the $600 charge for not having insurance. Also around this time, New York passed laws that said you could have someone fined up to $250 thousand simply for misgendering you. This wasn't as simple as calling a person who presented as female "he/him" because there had been recent new gender pronouns, like "xe/xir". Since it was impossible to know what someone wanted to be called, this effectively meant that you could have someone's house foreclosed on them, by charging them enough money all at once to force them to sell. While I believed that people in general weren't evil, this convinced me that there were in fact demons in the world, and they manifested through government tyranny.

High taxes, high regulations, all of this upset people enough that they tried to get rid of the system. After all, most people don't mind how other people live their lives, it's that freedom to live one's life in peace is a moral good, while telling other people how to live is a moral evil. And so, when one unfortunate politician made the political suicide of telling much of the country that it was racist, sexist, homophobic, and xenophobic when they honestly wanted everyone including their enemies to leave them in peace, the fact that they rightfully lost for their folly was blamed on Russian hacking.

I would like to say that with a new leader in power things were better, but he never really got the chance. Despite his

best efforts, most of the time, he was either defending against accusations of scandal, in impeachment proceedings, or dealing with other drama. He did manage to abolish the onerous mandate to have health insurance or pay a $600 fine. But it was like the demons blocked him from acting. After the second impeachment attempt failed, a "dangerous pandemic" swept the world. Although honestly, neither I nor Alexander my dad, not Bianca my father seemed to ever get it. My brother and sister claimed they got it once or twice, but I suspect that had more to do with over-testing than anything else. It was all too obvious to me that this was more tyranny being shoved down people's throats, and ultimately I suspected the man who was president during this time of being an accomplice in all this. After all, he hadn't told people what they needed to hear, that this whole thing was a fraud to seize power, and he had endorsed a dangerous vaccine that hadn't been tested but just arrived ready-made to fight this thing. Almost as if it had been planned years in advance.

I grew skeptical of the whole sorry thing, seeing this leader as controlled opposition, and deciding maybe in fact I had no friends. I had also argued with a friend (we'll call her Momo, though she's not Japanese) so I had one less person to talk to while dealing with near-total isolation. My parents didn't deal with this. They masked up, they played the game, and they made it a point to try to keep in touch with friends all during this. But I had only a few connections in this life, and once those were cut off, I basically shut down. I didn't want to eat.

I didn't even want to drink water. I didn't want to even breathe if I could help it. My parents tried to talk me out of this, but realized they couldn't force me. And so I lay in my bed waiting for death to take me. Time passed, and I was still not dead. It turns out that self-suffocation is hard because of a gag reflex, and the other two are long and slow ways of dying. I went down for whatever reason because I wanted to help my mom cook a curry dinner. Even if I wanted to die, I didn't want them to feel bad about it. Though I initially refused to eat curry. My folks eventually talked me through my sadness now that I was in the same room as them, and I finally wanted to eat again. The curry was one of the best things I had eaten, as it had coriander, cardamom, and cinnamon all freshly ground with vegetables chopped by me and my mother. Also, apparently a family friend had brought doughnuts, one of which was topped with bacon. It was probably awful had I been feeling better, but today after having nothing to eat, and finally letting go of some serious depression, it was the best dessert ever. There were other doughnuts there, coconut, almond, and I think blueberry frosted, but I only ate the bacon one. I cannot remember whether I ate the doughnuts or the curry first, honestly. But what I do remember is that this day rather closely resembled the story of Elijah (by the way, I am born on the Feast of Elijah, July 20).

> *Now Ahab told Jezebel everything that Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "May the gods*

*deal with me, and ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like the lives of those you killed!" And Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself traveled on a day's journey into the wilderness. He sat down under a broom tree and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life, for I am no better than my fathers." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." And he looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank and lay down again.*

Elijah later goes on a mountain, talks to the Lord, and God basically tells him "come outside, I can't hear you." He tells twice how everyone has abandoned him to do what is wrong, and he's the only one left. God tells him that he's not, that actually there are seven thousand who did not worship other gods, and that he is to appoint leaders to help him. But what made me laugh about this story was reading about the "cake of bread" after eating comfort food doughnuts.

MOMO

That's not really how things felt to me. One of my relatives died, and later on, I came down sick with the thing myself. It was lucky that I was protected or I might have gotten far sicker.

As for that argument, well it's been awhile, but I think one of my relatives said something similar, and it just pissed me

off so much. It pissed me off even more that I was hearing the same words from someone that I thought was my friend. I also needed time to work through the idea that some topics we just had to agree to disagree. Even though they were totally wrong. It took a long time to work up the nerve to make up with them, and to be honest, it had to go in stages from talking only occasionally, to getting letters asking what was going on, to return to normal conversation. The first attempt with letters ended up disastrously, with us both cutting contact for letters too. But then one of us sent a letter in response to a question about being plus one in a wedding of all things, and that led to another letter. And another, until finally returning to normal texting on Discord. So yeah, it was a wedding that neither of us wanted to go to, of all things, that brought us back in touch with each other.

While all of that was going on, my life was a quiet hell. My sister was having a baby or two, and we all were supposed to be excited for her while the house was crowded and she would barge in right when I needed to take a long shower to wash baby. That I had wants or needs didn't enter into the equation, because I was the one being selfish, of course. Never mind that my sister probably had enough for her own place between her working full-time and her husband bringing in money, but it was "selfish" of me to want to take a damned shower without a dirty smelly baby being shoved in my face. A friend of mine told me (just now) about a comedy horror called *Santa Jaws* where some kid sorta wishes his family would go away and a drawing of a holiday-

themed shark becomes real and they get attacked. While that movie seems absurd, in my darkest moments I've felt that. But then I remember I'd have to cook and clean and handle things all myself. To say nothing of it being kinda messed up to have that wish come true.

At the library, for quite awhile, it was surreal. We were closed, yet staff came in to change up the shelves and add to the interior. I was completely isolated during this time except other coworkers. I was sorting and shelving books that nobody was going to see, because library was closed to most of the customers. Then we "opened" but only for curbside service, and staff were still the only ones inside, while we moved in and out of the building for customers. Then we built this wall partition to keep out the disease. Then nobody seemed to believe in the disease, but the wall must remain, because reasons. I just don't know anymore. I suppose things are okay now though. I do miss being able to play music in the building and sing while shelving books.

## Chapter 5: Touring

### EMETT

But this wasn't the first time I'd dealt with demons. Around the time of the previous election, I had been in bad moods before. In fact, some of this had nothing to do with the leadership, and everything to do with my personal demons. As I mentioned before, I was a crossdresser since I was a child, but never really got to act on it. So a good bit of depression was spent moping over how I felt trapped in a

body that I didn't want. It was only later, nearly at age thirty, that I finally did sort of act on this, and when everyone was in lockdown, I largely lost all nerve and interest in it for quite awhile.

Then there was the time when a girl named Kelly broke up with me (we were never dating, it was a prolonged friendship or something), and I signed up for a volunteer teaching position overseas. The plane trip and such cost about $2000 just so I could get away from the pain of her just not being that into me.  I went to China for about eight weeks. Honestly, I for some reason expected vastly different trees and for rocks to be green or something, but the overall vegetation was pretty similar. China had azaleas, pine and spruce trees, and maples. What it did have different was a great deal more urban buildup. Yantai was a small coastal town I'd never heard of, but it was built up in places like I'd only seen in New York and Chicago. In comparison, the US seemed hopelessly rural through much of the country. I also noticed a particular bird outside my window that I'd never seen in America. I think it was called a White Wagtail.

This cute chirpy bird kept me company as I stared out the

window wondering what I was thinking coming to a country where I couldn't speak the language. I also got to tour the mountain of Ta Shan (not to be confused with Taishan), where a gauche theme park was built on the base of a mountain devoted to Taoist and Buddhist shrines. I ignored the tourist crap and climbed up, passing a grave and some other sights. There was some sort of giant ant statue, that was awesome and horrifying at the same time. Unfortunately, without any cultural context, I didn't understand whether it was some sort of nature deity or supposed to be some demon who ate souls in Buddhist purgatory. All I knew was that it was very eye-catching. See, look there it is.

Aside from seeing the cool pagoda and shrines atop this mountain (and indeed there was a great number of murals containing Byakko the white tiger, Suzaku the phoenix, Seiryuu the blue dragon, and Genbu the black turtle... though that's their Japanese names), I spent a great deal of my time watching shows.  Eventually, it snowed, about a month or two earlier than usual.  I had settled in, so I bought a VCD

player on a sketchy Chinese market that sold me the player on discount if I would also buy several other unsold merchandise, which included a microphone, a karaoke CD or two, and a German porn involving two women and a horse. Apparently, the guidebook said that this is part of Chinese culture. Haggling designed to benefit both parties. I wanted a cheap VCD player, and she wanted to get rid of her stuff. In any case, I got great use out of this VCD player, watching several anime and films. *Tokyo Mew Mew* (to which I had known as *Mew Mew Power*, a butchering of the series that ended midway), *Detective Conan* (what I had known as *Case Closed* and likewise ended before about 100 episodes), and *Return of Condor Hero*. The latter of these, I had to search for several years for the title because it was entirely in Chinese or Japanese. I had to ask people online, based on character names and random details. And it turned on the anime ended in an extremely weird place, with one of the characters slowly dying of poison and the two of them canoeing together. It was a weird and kinda dark ending that I only later found out was not the true ending, after watching the live action version. Along with anime, I also bought a scroll painting for 200 yuan, and some of the best gloves I'd ever owned. And all sorts of souvenirs.

As I was teaching, the first place was a bust, and I had to move. The second place, I taught mainly reading, directions, and simple games. In particular, I had to sing *You Are My Sunshine* an awful lot. During my off-time, I hung out in the teacher's lounge with a girl named Rain (who was hung up on

the fact that I was younger than her, but otherwise friendly), and learned about Korean dramas after watching the most depressing show of all time, known as *I'm Sorry, I Love You*. The girl falls for two brothers but I think her sister or something indirectly hurts both of them so they are slowly dying. One has a brain hemorrhage, another needs a heart transplant. The one brother decides to donate his heart when he dies, but the female lead sits at his grave when he dies, eventually poisoning herself.

All of this was very fun, but I didn't exactly plan ahead. I ran out of traveler's checks, so when my dad was late, I had left the key with Rain. I expected to meet my dad at the airport, but his plane was late due to a storm. So I had to have the key back, but Rain was gone for the night. The police had to bring her back to the school (Chinese police are scary), and I was super-embarrassed about making her go through that. My father spent the last eight days touring with me through Beijing, Wuhan, and Xi'an. He didn't seem to care about regular life in China, so we did a lot of train and boat rides. Total tourist. Anyway, we saw the Great Wall as well as the Forbidden City, and took a river tour of the Yangtze I think. One of the tours that I wanted to do was of the Little Goose Pagoda, as I'd heard that it was where the Buddhist scriptures mentioned in *Journey to the West* were stored. But our first tour guide was an asshole, so he drove past and said, "Take a picture as we go past!" I managed it, but it was a major disappointment that I could actually look at the ancient scriptures or whatever else was there. We did get to see an

underground market in Xian, as well as eat at a Chinese McDonald's, which had an interesting take on fried rice. They literally fried it like hash browns. We also got to look at some of the bell towers, and got to see the terracotta warriors. But still... most of his sites seemed to be very geared towards typical tourists, and he seemed to only want to go places where he got a cut. He was hoping we would spend a lot of money, even though none of the places allowed haggling. So anyway, these are some terracotta warriors. It's said that the First Emperor, Qin Shi Huang Di, built these warriors to guard his tomb, because he was insane and fanatical about immortality.

So here's the Little Goose Pagoda, as he drove past without stopping. Needless to say, we didn't give him nearly the money he wanted.

Our second tour guide was much cooler. In Beijing, we met Sunny, who guided us through the Great Wall. Unlike the other guide, she had a very perky attitude, and when I said that I wanted to go check out the Foreign Language Press in Beijing (since most of the books from China it turned out I couldn't read), she was willing to go. Needless to say, we enjoyed her company a lot more, and we not only spent more but recommended she get a promotion or raise.

This is Sunny, standing at the Great Wall.

We also got to check out the Beijing Opera, but nevermind all

that.

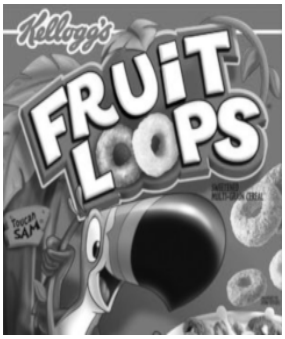
All of this did help to get my mind off of relationship drama, and into a normal mental state. But after I got back from China, I had reverse culture shock. I didn't know how to adjust to American life, and I in particular wasn't really ready to settle into the 9-to-5 daily grind. So it took a few years to really settle into work, and I never truly felt at home in the work world.

Later on, I met a girl named Caitlin in the Eastern Shore. She worked at the local bookstore, and after this graduation and return from China, she helped me pick up the pieces. I met her because she went on walks with our family ever night that we did that, along with a few neighbors who wanted to stay in shape.

Unfortunately, we were going to going to move, and I think I couldn't handle that eventuality, so I headed out west.  Yeah, I know. When things get tough, I only know how to cut and run.

I worked for WWOOF doing organic farming, allowing me to head everywhere from Forks in Washington to Mount

Rushmore and Yellowstone. On my way back, I even checked out Niagara Falls. But before that, I visited my sister Willow and her friend Ariel. I came at an interesting time when she was staying near the Mexican border, so at one point we climbed a mountain. They brought their puppies along too, so there was a whole event, with my sister, her friend, and her friend's older sister. Unfortunately, I'm not sure that I understand the timeline around this point, as when I met my sister, she was unmarried and seeing a loser boyfriend who ditched her to make pottery, but the one that she took on that mountain with her was the one who would be her future husband. I also remember her both rather unsettled in a city called Bisbee and living in a house near Douglas. I'm afraid that I can't reconcile these events beyond a split reality here. But then, ever since learning to use the heart sense, for some strange reason, I was able to see things like ripples in time and branching reality. I could also sometimes get snippets of the future as *déjà vu*. I could usually tell when something changed in time, as it left behind weird side effects. For example, trying to change the 2020 election so that Biden would win made all sorts of brand names filled with stupid misspellings (Froot Loops for instance, when the cereal was originally Fruit Loops). I have the box to prove it. See?




Similarly, Mandela probably did die in the 1980s, before the timeline was changed in order to save his life. Whenever the timeline changes, events and products change with it. For example, in Star Wars where Mandela died, Vader said "Luke, I am your father." But in all timelines where he lived, they said "No. I am your father." Because my memories are able to see across time and space, my normal short and long term memories don't work. Anyway, I digress. Here Ariel is below, making a victory sign after reaching the peak.

In about October of 2011, I set out on a trip that would

change my life. Part of it was due to the government shutting down, and part of it was due to... something else. But let's get to that later.

## Chapter 6: College

### EMETT

Let's back up a bit. Uhhhh, let's see. I graduated from community college, or I should say, I should have. I think that I was technically short one class. I never took a water colors class, of all things. Yeah, but anyway, I technically never graduated community college, but it was good enough to transfer into college (moving forward, filling out job applications was a mess, as my education was a cobbled together mess that didn't look good on paper). I moved into my dorm, and after a day, the roommate that I had basically asked if he could move nearby (so he could pork his girlfriend). I had no objections because I wanted privacy. He only came in when he heard there was going to be a room check. After that year, I always got a single room, so I was always in a quiet room, but also always alone. Thankfully, I did manage to find friends within the first year.

I met Will and his friends when I was looking through clubs. I ultimately didn't join the computer club that he was in, but I stayed in touch. He introduced me to a lot of anime, and I occasionally hung out in his room. It was more of frenemy relationship, but he did help me out when my truck basically shut down.

As far as driving to college went, it was a seven or eight

hour drive, and I was unsure how to get there and back. I never had to worry about it though. In the first year, I decided while I was wondering and worrying about it to donate blood. I remember the blood not going out of me easy, and it taking a long time. I don't know if it was because I was holding my breath because I was nervous or whether it was some deal where I wasn't feeling charitable, but it seemed very hard to give blood for some reason. The gal that was in charge of this had an alliterative name like Lindsey Laughlin or Lora Lemons or Leslie Lukeamos. Anyway, she told a gal named Kelly that I was needing a ride home, and she happened to live close by. This was a contrived coincidence if I ever saw one, but it really happened. But then, this is part of when I started not believing in coincidence.

I hung out with Kelly mainly only when she picked me up, as she was kinda a cheerleader type and had not much going on in common with me. Even so, we more or less more or less were able to have long conversations in the car about virtually anything. So even though it was an awkward crush, there was a sort of feeling where she had seen this sort of thing before and had come to expect it. I couldn't really explain it, but I sort of felt a same twinge of familiarity from her. In particular, the sense of déjà vu increasingly pervaded my life. I felt like I had seen my meeting with Kelly, seen part of a job that I had during the summer at Purdue, seen certain classes and tests, and certain meetings with friends. Sorta like this stuff with elemental energy and the heart sense thing had tapped me into strange energies where I was

connected to the past and future. I was excited at the idea that maybe I had some kind of destiny with Kelly (not quite), but somehow afraid that maybe my life was written out for me. Ultimately, I decided that fate (if there was such a thing) must go hand in hand with choice. That is, if some prophet could predict the future, the only way such a gift could be relevant is if by telling others there was some kind of impact on the future.

Viewed in the context of my infatuation with Kelly, knowing that potentially I could end up together with her or screw things up, I did the only right thing to do. I screwed it up, of course. First, I made her mix tapes filled with love songs. Then when her boyfriend broke it off with her because he was a douchebag and got in a bar room brawl (cementing in my mind the suspicion that maybe he was abusive), instead of being a shoulder to cry on, I tried to make it about me and my needs in an attempt to get her to forget her boyfriend and date me instead. Then when I saw her care parked near the curb, I waited for her near her car. Some police lady came up, and talked to me. She was nice yet firm, talking me out of stalking Kelly or anything like that. But now I was crushing on her instead. Oh yeah, and when she visited her boyfriend in prison, she had gotten a dog named Buddy because she was lonely. Unfortunately, she was inside for a good 45 or so minutes, and the dog looked like it needed to pee. I'd like to say that I didn't make a dog walk in the rain, but I kind of did. That day, she was very angry with me. Anyway, my clinginess and weirdness was something that I didn't really

tolerate in myself, but I couldn't really do much about it because I had the choices between being completely alone and being neurotic while trying to cope with poor interpersonal ability. And so, I just tried to do my best at a skill that I had no real understanding of.

In college, I wound up majoring in History and minoring in Horticulture. I guess I thought about mycology after looking at some book, but my mom Bianca said to "Stay away from that, as people might think you are into growing **those** types of mushrooms." And so, I was talked out of a promising career as a professional mushroom grower. As it was, I found out that I was getting overwhelmed between labs, tests, and essays so I wanted a light course load. Since two-thirds of my effort was actually coming from my minor, I switched to Religion as a minor. Since I pretty much thought of myself as a Druid anyway, now I had a degree to prove it. I didn't need to take English or mathematics, having pretty much completed two years of community college, so I pretty much was able to skip math altogether (which is good, because my math is very terrible). As a result of good planning (by that, I mean expert-level slacking), I was for the most part able to have most of my nights free until it was time to write essays or take midterm and final exams. As such, I was more or less free to hang out with friends or watch watch television I wanted.

My last year, I had an extra semester so I was able to pick whatever classes I wanted. I had two leftover history classes

(Civil War and Russian History), but I decided to take Philosophy, a class called The Search for Meaning, and two acting courses (Acting Appreciation and Introduction to Acting). The Philosophy course focused mainly on existential stuff like the problem of mind and body, talked about whether a tree made a sound if it fell in the forest, the brain in a vat, and eventually worked up to Descartes. It seriously made my think about the reality that I live in and how real it is. The Search for Meaning was a rather strange course, as we searched books, movies, or other things for an idea of meaning in life. For my final project, I decided to watch random movies and try to come up with a common theme. Acting Appreciation was a sort of history of theater, and the various aspects of lighting, sound, and scene. For the final test, we designed and wrote a play. I had forgotten one of the characters though, so I had to rewrite the play and add in her scene. The play turned out really dark, just from a change in tone of the lines. The female lead had amnesia, and the way I wrote it, I fully intended the male lead to start over after her amnesia, but the way the main actor read it turned out to be disturbing. Or maybe I didn't have a good sense of what was romantic and what was creepy. It happens, an entire genre of love songs in the 1950s had morbid romances where one or both lovers died.

As for Introduction to Acting, it was seriously hardest course I'd ever had. I was just so deadpan all the time. I never could figure out why. Maybe it was because I was sort of a gray person who didn't really think of the world in terms of

strong emotions, maybe it was my shyness. I later found out after college that I was depressed. I suspect it has a lot to do with all those prophetic incidents where things that I'd seen or dreamed about came to pass, but each time I seemed to have dropped the ball. I wasn't rich, powerful, or successful. I suppose that got me down, at least as much as feeling transgender. But at the time, I couldn't feel anything strongly, and thus acting courses were harder than math or science, harder than Organic Chemistry (one of the reasons that I wanted to leave Horticulture), and harder even than Calculus. Between memorizing lines, trying to make facial expressions for the part, and body language, I had a shocking lack of normal mannerisms to even act like another human being. It felt like junior high all over again. The last class, I actually got it right. It was called *The Importance of Being Earnest*. We did a very stripped down version, where a guy had a gal in the country and in the city. I agreed to crossdress as the country girl, and did an okay job reacting to his comments, but especially crying and leaving in a huff when it turned out that he wasn't interested in me.

On my way to the guidance counselor one day, a saw a girl sitting there in a nearby chair. Only, they weren't really a girl. They had long hair and no facial hair or obvious genitalia, but no real breasts or wide hips. They were the closest person that I'd ever seen to what I'd consider an angel. Not because they were beautiful, but because they were so lacking in sexual traits. Like some kind of shapeshifter superbeing or something. Anyway, after looking at them for

awhile, I had to get to guidance counseling.

THE ANGEL

He... he noticed me! That wasn't supposed to be possible! All this time watching him, and he saw me! Was it finally time for the plan? No... we should give it some more time, to make sure. But he's definitely starting to remember.

EMETT

I had a close call for two of my classes. One required a paper that I'd somehow not paid attention for, so I had to rush it to the teacher's office before it closed. The second was Russian History, where I kinda stayed up too late and overslept the entire exam. The Russian teacher wanted to give me a zero, but I begged and pleaded and they agreed that I could show up to the last class he had and take my exam there. Both of these were very close, but ultimately I did graduate, though probably not with honors. As for Kelly, I got to say hi to her at graduation, along with a few other people that I graduated with.

Things had been awkward between us, as you can imagine. One time, when she was about to pick me up for winter break, but she was at least an hour late. I finally wrote a note on my door, and instead stayed at the dorm and played the Civilization board game with Will and his friends. It was over three hours of gaming, and I remember deciding not to add income tax to my civilization, which meant that my group was stuck in the Dark Ages. The fun part was that I got a bonus to population somehow, so I had like hordes of sword-

wielding barbarians giving loads of trouble until about the space age, where they just ray-gunned them all. I had about two weeks where I lived on ramen and foraged crab apples and chestnuts, because the dining hall was closed for the winter. Another time, some guy named James or something picked me up, since he was the only other person who lived on the Eastern Shore to the best of my knowledge. Talking to him was kinda gruffer and less talkative, but it felt sorta the same as riding with Kelly somehow. In any case, Kelly and I were mostly okay by graduation, so I assume somehow things worked out. I don't remember if I just gave her time or what.

## Chapter 7: Fox

### EMETT

After college, things just settled into a rut for awhile. I worked as a janitor, I worked in the back room at a thrift store, I worked for an older lady to help her sort her things out before she moved, and I worked a lot for small homeowners who needed weeding or landscaping work. But for the most part, these were temporary jobs, and not at all full-time, typically only one or two hours of work and then I headed back home. I was depressed and hated myself for not being able to be who and what I wanted. In my heart, I wanted to be a girl, and I wanted to date a girl. I guess that made me a lesbian transgender person. Or a straight male with a clothing fetish, depending on how someone decided to define me. And usually depending on political leanings

nowadays.

Of course, at the time, I could barely articulate that I was unhappy, aside from periodic bad moods where I would argue with my parents or try to stay in my room all day. These were usually after several years without legitimate jobs, though typically I would do volunteer work at the library or at the theater. I would also freeze up when asked about my future plans. In the future, I was sure that I would live alone and then eventually, I would die. This was all that I could think about. In fact, whenever they asked, I envisioned a Cold House, cold both with loneliness and isolation and because I lacked the resources to heat everything. With the pictographic language I invented, I suppose I would have written it as .

All of this changed when I met Fox. Kat Fox Hillard, though she went by her middle name. I feel okay giving Fox's full name because in retrospect, it is very obviously a pseudonym. Katherine Hillard is a character from *Power Rangers*, Fox is probably short for Fox Mulder from *X-Files* series. So honestly, I have no idea what her name actually was, and thus probably anything that I call her is probably fine. I definitely was sure later that she maybe was a spy. Or not, I'll let readers decide.

In any case, I met her in an extremely odd way. Her mother had employed me for a good six or so hours for a couple times to work on her landscaping. This was pretty decent money, but she was planning to head out for a month or so,

and wanted me to watch her orange tree in addition to using a riding mower to mow her lawn during this time. A little background information about this place. I had to go to a few towns over, turn right at a street near a Mexican restaurant, turn again, cross a narrow bridge, and go between a mountain and a coastline until I got to their house. Their house was literally along a hill leading to the coast, and had a fairly steep hill, and it was kind of steep. Before this job, I had also never used a riding mower, and she wanted me to go faster than I was comfortable with. I didn't do anything like ram the riding mower into anything, but I was nervous enough that she had her doubts with me.  On like the third time I came to the house, something different happened. First, I was also supposed to use a weed whacker against the house to give it a clean area. While I was helping her mother, she told me about her daughter Fox who was working as a nurse, and I seemed kinda interested. She apparently would have her birthday around the time they were gone so I would get to meet her. Also while I was helping her mother, her dad was revving up the weed-whacker for use. And revving it. And revving it. To be honest, I think he flooded the engine, but when he gave it to me, I used it for a few minutes and it started smoking. I was paid, but they seemed to blame me for it breaking, and they told me that they weren't that confident that I wouldn't drive the riding mower into the river while they were gone.

So Mom had me write an apology note to her (seriously, I didn't do anything), and so something inspired me to as if I could at least be invited to her birthday. I fully expected her

to tell me no, but to my surprise, this was not objected to. Her mom only said that if you call her, and she said yes, then it was fine. That was apparently a big if,as I quickly found that her number was blocked to all calls. I tried texting her with that number, and she called me back on a different number to tell me yes, this was okay and that I should be there at around nine or so. Or maybe six, it was awhile back. I got there, and had some cheese platters while she and two guy friends discussed various topics, and watched some show called *Drunk Histories*, and another called *Too Cute* about kittens. On the way out, I asked her about the phone. Apparently the first phone number was the right one, but you couldn't call it because reasons that I didn't understand. Okay...

Anyway, I stayed in touch like once or twice a week, until one week when my parents were out of town and they had asked me to move a hammock. The chain kinda came undone while I was moving it, and the crossbeam hit me pretty hard in the forehead, and I was bleeding pretty heavily. I tried calling or texting my parents but they weren't picking up, so I tried to text Fox (since I couldn't call her, and since she worked in nursing). She walked me through how to be certain it wasn't a concussion or brain damage, and got me to wrap it properly with something cooling and take some rest for awhile. After this good advice (as you've seen from previous chapters, I don't have the best common sense), I was in touch with her more often. Once a week became twice a week. Then three times. Then nearly every day. I asked her all sorts of questions about what was going on with her lately, about

her family, or other such things. Then we went on a vacation for awhile (the same cottage that I visited when I was 18, as it was a yearly vacation almost, though we went in September instead of July after college or so because Mom had retired from teaching), and while I was talking to her one day (after my parents had noticed I basically "blew up the phone" from texting, and later switched me to unlimited texts), I noticed things didn't add up.

She was supposedly a nurse for older people, yet she didn't seem to have normal hours. When I was calling her all the time, she even picked up at 4am a few times. It was a though she was available at any time I needed help. She lived near the Washington DC outskirts. And she had a phone that needed to be called indirectly, and two different numbers. Uhhhh, was she really a nurse?

So I texted her point blank, «Uhhhh Fox, are you a spy?» Suddenly, someone who was available at any hour, even those that didn't make sense, was unavailable for nearly half the day. I eventually apologized, after which told me by text, «**I am** not **a spy**. But you can **believe** whatever you want.» The boldface text is what I decided to read. She later said something cryptic about, «Perhaps you will see things differently when you get back.» This could definitely be read as that perhaps I'd see good sense when I got back, and stop accusing her of being a spy. But the really didn't seem to be what she meant.

When I got back, I worked for my boss, Jim, a reverend

who had me gardening for him for a better part of two years. Only something seemed strange now. It was kinda like *Manchurian Candidate* with the Red Queen and the cards. When he said, "Hello, how are you doing?" which he always said when I got there, and always said about the same tone, it sounded more like a trigger phrase or something. It was an innocuous phrase, so I dunno how I came to that conclusion, but I was paranoid as hell right then, so that's what I heard. Then he told me, "Stay away from the Poison Ivy," and I heard this as a name of a person (like the 1959 song), rather than a plant name. Poison Ivy in this case was "*That Person* that I don't want you to see." And so on. After collecting the money, he asked me if I was okay, and I'm like "Yes, of course I'm okay." But I wasn't. I packed a few supplies, and headed for the car. My mom Bianca tried to stop me, but I decided she was with Them, whoever They were. So I yelled that I hated her, and nudged her out of the way, driving the car off. I got a phone call or ten trying to talk some sense into me, but I decided They would try to talk me out of things. I didn't know what these people that claimed to be my parents wanted of me, but I wasn't going to be a part of their evil conspiracy. I think I stopped by Fox's place to leave some clothing, but my memory is fuzzy here. I was under a lot of stress.

Fox

I am not at liberty to disclose whether or not I work as a spy or a nurse. But in any case, I continued my work while Emett did his thing. Except one day, he panicked and

wandered off. His parents called me, as he had apparently chucked his cellphone out the window. This would make it somewhat more difficult to track him. Emett visited me, leaving some clothing there, then headed at west as best as I am supposed to know. After all, why would I know anything more?

What's that? You think that maybe I do know where he went to? Absurd! And there were absolutely no reason why roads that week were unreasonably blocked to slow his escape toward a destination that might result in his death. It was all the government shutdown and had nothing to do with me at all.

His parents apparently filed a missing persons report and he was pulled over near Kansas and Missouri. Unfortunately, on his way back from Wyoming, he was almost arrested near Sterling. Don't ask me how I know this. I'm just a nurse!

EMETT

As I suspected that whatever these people were targeting me for was nothing good (a communist cell? Some sort of terrorist regime? Dude, I'm a red-blooded American, even if I am femme as hell), I decided it was better to die than be used. So I drove west, intending to head to the Grand Canyon and drive or jump off. I was, needless to say, not in a good place.

I had gone through a police checkpoint and was pulled over (I wasn't speeding or anything), because I was in fact the person they were looking for. I was a missing person, and now they found me. Yay! But unfortunately, later on, when

they found me again, the cops decided that I had stolen the car. In a last ditch effort, I asked the police to call my parents to confirm that the car had not been stolen. My mom, whose number I remembered, wasn't at the phone. I think I needed to ask them for help with my dad's number (they of course could pull up records). So they later wrote his name and number on the registration, along with my mom's. Yeah, I was hopeless, not even properly remembering my parent's contacts. And the worst part about it was some teasing about how when you get locked up... followed by an indirect reference to dropping the soap.

Uhhh let's back up a bit from dropping the soap. I appear to have skipped ahead again. Let's talk about how I got from a Kansas checkpoint all the way to a Sterling intersection where my car almost slammed into a telephone pole. I had gone to Wyoming, after my brother by email convinced me that even if I was off on a suicide mission, there was no way that I'd be able to do what I wanted. Obama had after all refused to put any kind of cap in spending so the government had shut down this week. And so I was decided to move north, toward the unforgiving colds of someplace like North Dakota or Minnesota. Though where I was considering was West Michigan. I got as far as a rest stop in Wyoming before I had to pull in for the night. At around 4am, I awoke shivering. All around me was snow and ice, but thankfully I hadn't been snowed in place.

And then I noticed something. You know that game you

sometimes do as a kid where the windows are foggy, and you doodle something with your fingers? Well, on the outside of the car, between the snow and the windshield were the words written, « (@//M3h ». Having read the webcomic Megatokyo, I knew what l33t was, and how you could substitute out letters and numbers to make words. It said, *Call Me* as clear as day to me. I thought through the logistics of how that got here. Either my mom wrote it, Fox's friends wrote it while I was distracted with her, or it was some kind of message that miraculously appeared. Giving my mental state, this was what I decided was most likely. Especially since in order for either of the other two to be a thing, someone either was trying to subliminally get me to call them (Fox), or knew that I would be heading to some place very very cold (Mom or God). I thought about the odds of someone knowing that in advance, and it basically ruled out all but the last. In any case, I felt deeply loved. Suddenly, like the guy in *It's a Wonderful Life*, I said to myself, "I want to live!" I drove away from Wyoming, trying to get out of a blizzard, stopped at a gas station that was open at a crazy hour (it turned out my car really needed gas). I headed east, but when it became clear that I was skidding all about the road, I started to go south. Unfortunately, my choice of roads led to a tattered and bumpy drive that had no salt or anything. I couldn't stop, yet no life flashed before my eyes. Instead, as I veered toward a telephone pole, I instead quickly reacted, veering right to get off the road and avoid hitting any cars, then to the left as I slid off into a ditch. I was totally unhurt,

and thought about all the people at home probably praying for my safety. Well, their prayers worked. Despite skidding all around in a blizzard, I never hit one car, nor that big phone pole.  But now I was answering cops and about to be arrested. But that didn't happen either. But I was hit by a big fine for failure to stop, and I think I got a towing fine too, even though they didn't tow my car more than about ten feet. Stupid town. Who puts a telephone pole right past an intersection?

After that, I made my way to a truck stop, and settled in for the night. Unfortunately, when I got in my car the next day, I found out that the battery was dead. After wanting to give up once again, I found a guy named Noah who was willing to restart my car using a cord.

## Chapter 8: A New Life

### EMETT

I headed home from my attempted suicide trip out west. As trips go, I tend to like ones that are fun, and involve things like sightseeing. But anyway. My parents interpreted my moving off as never wanting to live near them again, something I eventually amended, but for now they instead found me a place in the nearby city of Richmond.

For two people who I had supposedly estranged, Alexander and Bianca were being extraordinarily helpful, and found me a quiet place with low rent in the city outskirts. As were my Ash and Willow, my siblings. Willow gave me a hint that Gargarean was hiring (not only people's names but business

names are changed). Likewise, after I quit rather than get fired from Gargarean, Ash told me about BigBlock. As such, I found a lot of things different from then on.

Let's start with the apartment. Somehow this low rent apartment seemed ideal. It was basically a divided up house with electricity, WiFi, HVAC, and running water all included. I honestly don't know why it was so inexpensive, aside from living on city outskirts. But even though it was good to be true, I started to really dislike my roommates. There was Chris, a dude-bro (for those not familiar with the term, basically a jock frat boy who says "dude" and "bro" all the time), who spent a lot of time in relationship drama with his girlfriend/ex-girlfriend/re-girlfriend Jasmine. Jasmine was actually quite sweet, but with a fiery temper. Both of them were slightly abusive and dysfunctional in different ways, not seriously so but enough that I was concerned. But Jasmine wasn't exactly a battered woman either, as she gave back as good as she got. There was another roommate (we'll call him Jeremy), and one that only lasted a few months before he got fed up and moved out (who I'll call Robert). As a condition of living there, I had to keep certain areas of the house clean. Robert had left some notes along the lines of, «Dear Emett, I would appreciate it if you were to clean the downstairs bathroom. It stinks in there, and I think it's time you pulled your weight for the greater good of the household.» To which I responded, «Dear Robert, I would also appreciate you not leaving passive-aggressive notes rather than telling this to me in person. Secondly, I don't care about the "greater

good" but I do care about the fact that I have just worked several ten hour shifts at Gargarean, and do not appreciate work being dumped on top of this. I never see you leave the house, so if it bothers you so, why don't you do it? Lastly, while I am willing to help out keeping the house clean, I would like to clean things I actually use, like the upstairs bathroom, the kitchen, and the room with the television.» I more or less got my wish eventually, but it was still an enormous hassle. Robert left and got replaced by a guy called James. He was easy going and more mature than either Chris or Jeremy, but had the sort of demeanor where I didn't want to make him angry. The house was frequently filled with reefer smoke, but I was neither involved in that (I was a child of the Winners Don't Use Drugs era) nor did I really care to condemn them for it. I just excused myself, and largely kept to myself. I tried to keep the house cleaned as promised, but sometimes there seemed to be phantom dirt, like where I sprayed down the toilet but I was told that it looked so dirty. But beyond that, staying in the house overall proved to be ummmm... interesting.

Aside from the landlord not wanting a lot of things in the apartment that were in there (Jasmine, drugs, alcohol, loud parties), some of the drama with Chris proved to be interesting. Chris had two moms as a result of the first one rejecting him for adoption, and he had a crushed rib cage due to a bad birth. Jasmine was a busty sorta Middle Eastern-looking gal (so she had a weird combination of brown hair and very tan skin, though I suspect she was actually half-

black from her parents), who apparently used to be an escort, but now was working towards becoming a nurse. Jasmine had told Chris that nobody but her would accept his body, and another time Chris pushed Jasmine down the stairs. Yeaaaaah, it was that kind of relationship... After awhile, Chris and Jasmine broke up after a nasty phone call from her. Chris dated a blond gal who was Greek or something (let's call her Oikos). So we got really good food when she came over. But then Chris was back to dating Jasmine. I asked, "Why did you leave Oikos? She seemed very upbeat and nice. And she was good at cooking!" He shook his head like this was a really stupid question, "Nah, she was boring!" The funny thing was, Oikos looked a lot like Jasmine in the height and eyes area. It was like he was dating a blonder and more chipper version of Jasmine, yet he wanted to go back to the depressed and dysfunctional one because the other was boring. I shrugged.

As for my jobs, well let's start with Gargarean. Gargarean is a multi-floor football-stadium-sized factory that was arranged less like a warehouse and more like a series of bookshelves arranged by Satan. That is, in a lot of warehouses, Costco and Aldi being commercial examples, you tended to have all items of a type on the same shelf. Gargarean had its items shelved, to in turn be picked up. Using a scanning gun (or Telxon, which like the Xerox, was named after the company that made it), the prospective collector was assigned to scan the shelf, scan the item, then scan the box. When the box was filled, I can't remember if

you scanned the conveyor belt or scanned the box out, or just scanned a new box. But in any case, I thought I was fairly fast at this, and certainly had more hustle than some people working there, but other people had higher quota scores. After Christmas, I was shifted to stowing on shelves, where I had to do about the same process in reverse (box, then item, then shelf, if I remember correctly). I suspect this number was based on some arbitrary measure of my ability to learn about things rather than my actual collection rate (which never majorly went up or down despite rise or fall in my pace), as I seriously didn't care enough to be bothered to figure anything out about the place. I think I usually got about 79 to 84/120 or something, the latter of which was impossible no matter how fast I walked. As it was, the only time I actually did above normal was when I won a contest of sorts for most items picked that day, and got a small gift card. That time, I saw some interesting items like limited edition games or rare stuff, because they sent me all around the place. But for the most part, no, I was more interested in a girl named Sapphire. She was more of a slacker than I was, yet somehow she stayed employed, and seemed to do better than me on the quotas even when she wasn't there due to scheduling off-days. But since she was fun to talk to, I stayed in touch with her, usually talking during breaks. That thing I said about the heart sense, we always seemed to find each other when we wanted to talk, even though it was a huge warehouse with several floors of shelves and two sides.

After a few weeks of work at Gargarean, I took a weekend

trip to visit Fox. It had been a lot of work, and this was before I met Sapphire I think (I met her immediately after I was muttering to myself about how lonely this job was, literally almost bumping into her). She agreed to meet in Old Town of Fredericksburg for just some coffee. Only, coffee turned into dinner at an Asian restaurant. How? Well, I headed over to Fredericksburg, and got there roughly three hours to spare. Only there was congestion and detours, leading a square, blocking off the entire area two blocks around the coffee shop. I searched in vain for a parking spot or a way to make it even a block closer. I finally found a spot that was a block or two away from the square, and called her up. The coffee shop by this point was about to close, and apparently this was some impromptu festival that my mom knew about but sounded made up. I thought about the logistics of making a fake festival and how many construction people would need to be involved along with how many people were needed to do a fake celebration. It seemed like a very fox-like prank, and very consistent with my assumption that she was a spy. So while I wound I trying to walk there anyway, she eventually texted me to say that we should go somewhere else. I wound up driving to some other place where I ate my first taste of Peking Duck in my life. If that seems weird, it's because every other time I tried it, they were out of duck.

She was carrying a husky from another job, which she left in the car. As we entered the restaurant, I apologized for the hassle of coming here, "...I mean, I was okay with coming to

the cafe, but when I finally got parked, it was too late to get there." She shrugged, "No worries! I was running late anyway." *No worries*. I was to hear this particular catchphrase from strangers, bosses, and friends the next few years to come. Whether male or female, many people I met said this phrase. Aside from Pokemon Diamond & Pearl and maybe the Lion King, this wasn't an expression I'd heard a great deal. I was only to piece together what this meant later.

She looked around frantically for some reason. "What's up?" I asked. Fox explained, "I'm looking for a friend of mine." But the way she was looking was strange. It wasn't like you would look for a friend who was recognizable, but like she was trying to see through a thick fog. Or some type of illusion. We ate dinner, had a few conversations, and then both headed back on our way.

The next day, it was like a fog was lifted from my eyes. I was able to look at people the same way as Fox. In the warehouse, I saw a girl with brick red hair in a ponytail, and it was sorta like I was seeing Fox in her form. I can't explain it, except from a Biblical passage that I'd read.

> *Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him. He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk*

*along?"*

*They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" He asked, "What things?"*

*They replied, "About Jesus of Nazareth. He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus."*

*He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us,*

*for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight.*

Basically, while before I was unable to see Fox, now I could recognize her through her disguise. Certain mannerisms like the catchphrase above, or a certain intensity in her eyes, or something about how her face looks. I concluded that I probably did not have an accurate picture of how she actually looked, but if I had to guess, I would have described her much like this picture below. This was a picture that I came across painted by an amateur artist when I had been visiting my sister in Arizona.

Of course, I have no way of knowing that. But this is more or less how she looked when I saw Fox in the flesh.

Whether fat or skinny, white, black, or otherwise, I could often (but not always) see through the veil that was around Fox. I spent hours, on top of doing my work at Gargarean and cleaning house, recording the messages I got from text or Facebook. Most of them seemed innocuous on the surface, but the way I interpreted them (which was obviously right) was in the most strange way possible. For example, she was talking one time about how on the way back from work she saw some pathetic-looking injured deer, and I decided she meant that the deer way symbolically me, and that it was an indicator that my work at Gargarean was doing terrible.

FOX

Actually, I literally did see a deer on the way back from work. But I decided to use that image, since it was clear that Emett was self-conscious about work. It was time to get him into therapy, as his stress was causing him to make mistakes at work. He hadn't gotten sleep in awhile either, so I used this

image to let him draw the conclusions he wanted.

I posed as a Dr Coelacanth, a conservatively dressed woman in her mid fifties, using this as a opportunity to talk more personally. Emett was indeed suffering from quite a bit of paranoia, as well as job-induced stress, but this planted the idea in his head that maybe he needed to reach out for help. It was good that he was seeing me as Sapphire, but not so much that he was beyond recopying my texts, and had moved on to other people as well. He was too busy, too stressed, and frankly no less lonely than when I had first met him. Worse, he seemed to have the idea of a spy from James Bond films, thinking that I was going to send him on some kind of mission. Any mission right now would probably get him killed. He needed calm more than anything.

As Dr Coelacanth, I probed him on his past, getting him to talk about family, what was bothering him at work, and eventually got him to dig deep into his past. Since I wasn't a real therapist, I often missed conclusions that were logical, but it didn't matter. Emett was problematically closed off, and I needed to get him more outgoing. As Sapphire, I also tried to get him to talk more. The Gargarean warehouse eventually wanted to split the two of us to opposite sides of the factory, which I could tell made him upset. Before I moved, he gave Sapphire a note which said something along the lines of, «Dear Sapphire, I think the world of you and hope that you read this and it makes an impression. I have always cared about you, and I will miss you when I get moved over to side

B of this Gargarean factory. I have drawn this cool dragon over here to show how much I care...» There was also a cool looking stylized dragon, as he said, covering the entire left side of the letter. The word impression seemed to be slightly darker than the other words. It was then that I notice the left side, that was covered with a dragon, was actually there to camouflage where he had apparently embossed the page with the back end of a pen, rendering the message, «Hey there, Fox.» He sent a text to Sapphire apologizing if he came across as weird giving that note. As I was Sapphire, I texted him, «No worries! It's fine.» He had long since figured out that I, like Fox was only available by text, so despite our being apart, it wasn't hard to contact him. Actually, in addition to working as a collector when I saw him, I worked the cameras and occasionally in disguise. I was talented at this, and the company valued me and allowed me to pursue my own agendas.

Emett was moved to shelving department after the holiday, and he seemed to be having even worse trouble. He took the position as some kind of symbol that he needed to shut up and do his work, at a time when he was particularly emotionally vulnerable. Further, the job screwed with his OCD, and he didn't like to compete against others. I determined that if he were ever to be a real spy, by the analogy of collecting and shelving, he was half-decent at analysis when he wasn't paranoid, but probably terrible at keeping secrets. I recommended that he deal with some of his isolation by joining social groups, and he tried an anime

group, a church, and a D&D roleplaying group. Eventually, he was in fact final warned for poor progress, but in the mean time, he decided to give another disguise of mine in the B section a different note. I was confused, as I peered over it looked for a trick. It was a normal letter.

EMETT

That *was* the trick. I figured if she looked at it like a normal note, I would know that she was just a regular girl. But she closely examined it, searching for some kind of cipher or anomaly. This proved to me that she was Fox.

Originally, I thought that Gargarean was a cold and heartless place to work. It seemed as though the founder was a sociopath who intentionally set the job up to cause human suffering. Let me explain. Collectors were on a strict quota, and supposed to pick up close to 120 items per hour (but the quota didn't seem to really work based on time, as I always did horribly while people who moved slower than me like Sapphire got a better rate). They tended to make a mess sorting, which meant that when I as a shelver put items in, and the QA people checked my box, it would be all messed up to hell. Collectors also created a nuisance to the shelvers if there weren't enough of them or they didn't move fast enough, leaving no room to stow anything. The shelvers in turn tended to have to follow etiquette rules that determined where you could put things and how much. So as a shelver, I would likely force some poor collector to get on the floor for certain objects, ruining their time quota.

But now I wasn't so sure. I had checked out the book the therapist recommended, *When Panic Attacks*, but Gargarean itself also had a "recommendation" among the items that I worked through in shelving, a book called *The Gifts of Imperfection*. I slowly understood that I was being taught personally by them to work through my perfectionism, rather than being ignored as I thought. The people at Gargarean were looking out for me! But that wasn't really what got to me. You see, there were these alarms at various spots in the building that said "All Ready," "Not Ready," "Storm Warning," or "Fire Warning." I noticed one day while I was in that I was in a blue funk (hadn't seen Sapphire in awhile and my roommates were making me crazy) but I did my best to hide my feelings. Yeaaaaah, the cameras read me like a book, as the security blipped "Storm Warning." I think that day, some approached me asking if I was okay, and I realized that the entire system, rather than being very cold, actually was monitoring me down to my emotional state, my every frown and smile. I was simultaneously very pleased and very creeped out. So in some corner shelf, I went and cried for awhile, both pleased that Gargarean was not quite as heartless as I thought but I was also certain that I was emotionally not up for continuing. I could take mindless shelving or pulling items just fine, but it was this weird The next day, I got a "Fire Warning" and unfortunately, it was my final warning, meaning there was no hope of promotion.

FOX

Emett surprised me by quickly bouncing back from

Gargarean. Within a few weeks, he had another job. Not that it lasted. The local BigBlock store was opening, and he helped build the store shelves, then chose a job outside his comfort zone to try to become more social. He would eventually quit, mainly because the schedule of the job meant he was wearing out his car by driving it around, yet not be able to make routine repairs. Another people was that the job didn't really respect any kind of regular schedule, meaning that all of these fun activities set up in advance were difficult to plan for. He couldn't keep promises to family, to the church, to anything, because there was no way to know that week what would happen. Add to the fact that the payment scheme seemed to space out a three week schedule so only the first one and a half week counted, and it was a recipe for disappointment. On his final day at work, he tried to see if it was feasible to to get to the BigBlock store on foot. After walking nearly six miles, and having blisters on his feet, he promptly told the people to tell the boss that

But this wasn't the only surprise. In addition to church, gaming, and anime clubs, he decided to join LGBT groups. He wanted to be a she? Well, this wasn't out of nowhere based on our studies, but it was a surprise that she wanted to go through with it, and even more of a surprise, that she manage to use the last two sessions of therapy convincing me to approve it. And she kept up with the process, going to get her name changed at the legal offices, then going to the social security and changing name and gender, then heading to the DMV, and finally to the post office where she tried to get a

passport. The hardest of these two were the DMV and the passport. But she prevailed. "What would you like you new name to be?" I asked her, while I was still her therapist. She paused, "Well, my father's name was Alexander. For some reason, maybe a variant of that? Allie, Allegra, Alana, Alexa..." I shook my head at the last one. I heard that Alexa was part of a rival company. I suggested, "What about Alicia? It's a nice name."

ALICIA

In other states, changing your gender is hard, sometimes requiring a legal battle for identity, or at the very least to get a year of passing followed by surgery. But in Virginia, it was super-easy, barely an inconvenience. Since I had approval from my therapist, most of the issue for things like the IRS were simply a matter of waiting in line for hours. Since I had no job anymore, I was able to set aside this time in order to do so, but the DMV, like the DMV everywhere, proved to be an enormous nuisance. I returned there again and again, until they explained that I had to send a letter to their medical department. And so, I mailed the letter, and after a few weeks, I got the note, waited in line yet again, talked to people, and finally got the form allowed me to adjust my information. Then I had to wait again for my actual driver's license. After that, although not strictly necessary, I updated my college record, taking a road trip just to visit them in person, and went to Gargarean, where they seemed to give zero shits what I called myself. I waited about an hour and a half, and they didn't seem to understand what I was even

trying to do.

I had planned to move back home by April 1st, because frankly I was sick of Richmond. I just barely finished all paper work in time (well, almost, it turned out that I had IRS info for state and federal to fix as late as two years after that, which required driving to Richmond). I was fed up in large part due to the amount of driving I had to do to see friends who only sorta cared about me, and the amount of gas money that represented. I was also disgusted with that my landlord was supposedly a tolerant liberal, but appeared to be trying to force me out of the place. The landlord had tried to add a new roommate, but I'm afraid I have no flattering name for her. The landlord said that she was a good cook, and a fun roommate that I might have a lot to talk about with. I had a less than positive attitude going in, and I feel like that colored the situation, but she was a pretty awful woman. She bought so much food that I couldn't put my own food in the fridge, cluttering the counter with crap. She cooked with heavy amounts of Crisco creating burnt spots on the frypan when cooking fucking eggs. So I had to clean that up, as I had kitchen duties. I was doing laundry , and hers was in the way, so I moved it atop the dryer. She accused me of taking her panties. What?!? She slept with the lights on and the door open. She welcomed sketchy strangers into our home. Ultimately, feeling unsafe, I locked her out. She banged on the door, but I couldn't help how I felt. I was forced to open the door by the roommates. I felt so trapped and betrayed that I started banging my head against the wall until it started

bleeding. And this is why I wanted to move back home.

FOX

Reality is a funny thing. The Tao te Ching describes the truth like water, that is to say that like water, reality is able to shift to great extent, much like adding sand, salt, or sugar to water. Or chamber pot water. And so, reality is like that scene in Star Wars where Luke enters the cave in Dagobah, and he is warned that in the cave there will only be what he brings with him. He mistakenly brings his sword and has to battle a nightmare. In the same way, we who are humans invite good and evil by our first impressions.

## Chapter 9: Chop Wood and Carry Water

ALICIA

There's an old Zen Buddhist expression about chopping wood and carrying water. Sometimes it's an expression about before enlightenment and after enlightenment, doing these things. Other times, it's a longer story about a young monk complaining to the abbot. The point is three things:

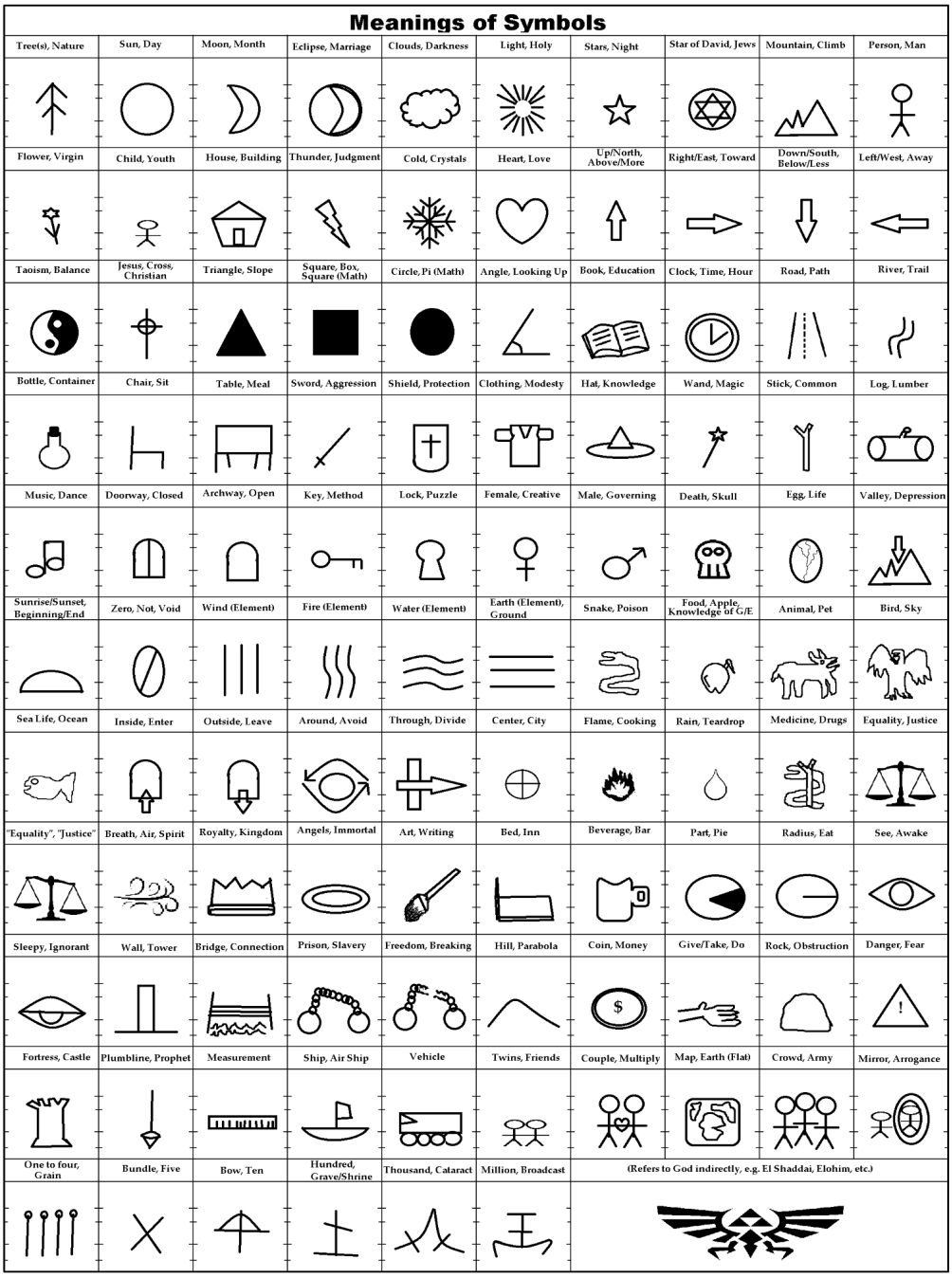
1. That although it appears nothing has changed outside, everything is different now on the inside. This was certainly true, even if I hadn't achieved enlightenment. I couldn't turn back these experiences or deny them.

2. To appreciate miracles in the ordinariness of life. Everything seemed normal, much like Fox seemed on the surface like any other girl, but this all was very strange. Yet the greatest blessing to me was peace and quiet.
3. That life goes on, regardless of enlightenment. Learning about Fox did help me learn some spiritual powers, but it didn't make me richer, happier, or better adjusted. If anything, life sometimes was harder because I now had experienced a world beyond the normal one.

And so, I moved back home. I got a job at the local library as a woman. And I kept myself busy, but I found that things were not normal there either because the way I perceived things wasn't the same anymore. I made up with my parents, agreeing to stay with them for room and board in exchange for help them out around the place. I rejoined my church as a different person. And although I tended to hang around the same friends, the way that I lived now was different. I had been changed by my life in the city.

Not just that. There's this theory that each language represents a way of looking at the world. That theory was in an awesome movie known as *Arrival*, which was actually more satisfying on the second water than the first, as I suddenly understood that the main movie was actually in the past, and the character was stuck in a sort of prophetic time loop, with the beginning and end in the future. This makes the film extra weird because it appears that she is depressed about a daughter, but that hasn't happened yet. So when I wrote about a language back in my days of inventing things, I

created an open-ended pictographic language where words are symbols, and symbols can mean different things to different people based on their memories. The next page shows how this sort of thing works. There was also a syllabic method of using this language, but I don't think I want to bore people with all of that. The point is that the same symbol could mean "elm/maple/oak/tree/nature/forest" or any other related concept. Likewise, a symbol like could mean anything from darkness to mist to a single cloud or many clouds, or even used in science to represent gas when Greek symbols had been recycled so much that they were difficult tell whether you meant delta for change, Laplace, as a discriminant in polynomial, etc.


Meanings of Symbols
Tree(s), Nature
Sun, Day
Moon, Month
Eclipse, Marriage
Clouds, Darkness
Light, Holy
Stars, Night
Star of David, Jews
Mountain, Climb
Person, Man
Flower, Virgin
Child, Youth
House, Building
Thunder, Judgment
Cold, Crystals
Heart, Love
Up/North, Above/More
Right/East, Toward
Down/South, Below/Less
Left/West, Away
Taoism, Balance
Jesus, Cross, Christian
Triangle, Slope
Square, Box, Square (Math)
Circle, Pi (Math)
Angle, Looking Up
Book, Education
Clock, Time, Hour
Road, Path
River, Trail
Bottle, Container
Chair, Sit
Table, Meal
Sword, Aggression
Shield, Protection
Clothing, Modesty
Hat, Knowledge
Wand, Magic
Stick, Common
Log, Lumber
Music, Dance
Doorway, Closed
Archway, Open
Key, Method
Lock, Puzzle
Female, Creative
Male, Governing
Death, Skull
Egg, Life
Valley, Depression
Sunrise/Sunset, Beginning/End
Zero, Not, Void
Wind (Element)
Fire (Element)
Water (Element)
Earth (Element), Ground
Snake, Poison
Food, Apple, Knowledge of G/E
Animal, Pet
Bird, Sky
Sea Life, Ocean
Inside, Enter
Outside, Leave
Around, Avoid
Through, Divide
Center, City
Flame, Cooking
Rain, Teardrop
Medicine, Drugs
Equality, Justice
"Equality", "Justice"
Breath, Air, Spirit
Royalty, Kingdom
Angels, Immortal
Art, Writing
Bed, Inn
Beverage, Bar
Part, Pie
Radius, Eat
See, Awake
Sleepy, Ignorant
Wall, Tower
Bridge, Connection
Prison, Slavery
Freedom, Breaking
Hill, Parabola
Coin, Money
Give/Take, Do
Rock, Obstruction
Danger, Fear
Fortress, Castle
Plumbline, Prophet
Measurement
Ship, Air Ship
Vehicle
Twins, Friends
Couple, Multiply
Map, Earth (Flat)
Crowd, Army
Mirror, Arrogance
One to four, Grain
Bundle, Five
Bow, Ten
Hundred, Grave/Shrine
Thousand, Cataract
Million, Broadcast
(Refers to God indirectly, e.g. El Shaddai, Elohim, etc.)

I also imagined this as some sort of benefit to cryptography, as people writing codes could decide between two people what individual letters meant, and assign syllables to these letters to make a cipher or something. But most important to me was the way this language taught you to think, as everything in the natural (and man-made) world as a symbol. For example, a girl named Sarah Fox wasn't just named Sarah Fox because Fox was a family name and they liked the name Sarah, but because she and all of her family were part of a fox clan, and the name Sarah meant "princess" so she was a princess of the fox clan. Or a random book or movie that I picked up from the library and gave to my friend Momo to check out for me might have some amazing symbolic meaning to her, while to me it was just a movie. Or vice versa. Some symbols are only of value to those who want them in the first place.

I had fun working at the library, but eventually the manager let me go. It all started when the first manager (though technically the term is librarian, as all of us workers are actually library assistants working at the circulation desk) decided to finally retire. After that, things got more intense...

Well, it all started when we had to work without a librarian for a few months or whatever. We had to make decisions on our own, and often had to figure out things ourselves. Then the next manager came, and the first thing she said was that she wanted me to think of myself as though I was manager, and give any suggestions I thought were good. Liar. Had I

been told otherwise, I would have been perfectly fine keeping my suggestions to myself. Instead, it seemed like the more ideas I had, the more my schedule seemed either too intense leaving me prone to mistakes. I actually felt like I was getting set up like Uriah in the Bible.

> *In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it with Uriah. In it he wrote, "Put Uriah out in front where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw from him so he will be struck down and die." So while Joab had the city under siege, he put Uriah at a place where he knew the strongest defenders were. When the men of the city came out and fought against Joab, some of the men in David's army fell; moreover, Uriah the Hittite died.*

Whenever it was my shift, before with the first manager, there would typically be two people on duty. This was standard practice so that multiple tasks could be done, and that people weren't assigned things above their pay grade.

But after this, the other workers would be sent to do projects, while I had to watch the desk alone. I would get hit with long stretches of customers, and sometimes checking items in or out, the scanner would malfunction. I was constantly second-guessing myself, because a failed check-out meant items could be removed from the library and got lost, while a failed check-in meant customers complained of fines. Worse, sometimes we had internet down. I dutifully recorded check-ins and check-outs, but for all I knew, someone after me simply chucked the sheet in the trash, not

understanding what to make of it. Stupid volunteers.

And I was indeed given things that I have never dealt with myself. When I asked about it, she was verbally abusive, "It's two years and you don't know how to do this?" No, I don't. Another worker, we'll call her Melissa, normally handles this. Or Sylvia. Or Whatever. But if you want to teach me how, I'm okay learning. Instead she used it as an excuse to further cut my hours, even though I was trying my hardest to get these back.

The final straw was two things. We had a computer that was hooked to display announcements on a TV. We were supposed to turn it on every day, yet it demanded a PowerPoint presentation loop (very distracting) and didn't even bother to display the time. So while I was working with a library accountant who seemed bad at her job, I decided to try to get this system to work better. I tried to animate the lock screen (better idea) but spent much of the five or so hours at work to no avail. Finally, I managed to figure out how to make the background change. "Hey, that's cool! You should hide the tiles too," she suggested. As they say, "Sufficiently advanced incompetence is indistinguishable from malice." She didn't bother to tell her superiors that she hadn't bothered to talk me out of this brilliant idea of mine, and that she had given me the bright idea to try to hide the icons. As a result, they couldn't find anything, even though I did get the background to animate. They called the computer tech up because they didn't know where the PowerPoint was,

and didn't bother to read my directions that said that the system now ran via timed background changes. You could maybe call me up, and ask me? But the very last thing was from the manager herself. She told me that there was a rule that library memos must be typed (there was no such rule, I checked the other memos, they were everything from typed to handwritten). So she had be go over and retype this note, while she abused me about my "unintelligible handwriting." Once I did, she sends an email to everyone, taking credit for my work. That's fine, but what isn't fine is that on top of that my hours had been cut. I complained to anyone who would listen, which was basically the inverse of "You can't fire me, I quit!" You can't make me quit, but I **will** make you fire me. And so she did.

MOMO

I met Alicia at the library while I was working there. She was sweet and oddly interesting, I guess. She'd definitely traveled and seen more of the world than I have, plus she seemed good with computers, also liked anime/manga, and was also a storyteller and wrote all sorts of things. It was also nice to talk to another person in the LGBT spectrum at a time when I was struggling with being bisexual and/or aromantic. Though, she wanting me to go out on a date with her, she wasn't really relationship material and I wasn't all that interested in that kinda romance. I did want to be her friend though, I guess.

I suppose I had met her when she went by Emett at one

time, but she was kinda introverted when she identified as a guy. Mostly he just stuck to shelving books and didn't really talk to anyone. It was only after Emett became Alicia that she seemed to come out of her shell a bit.

I dressed casually to work, but she always tried to look fancy, as though it was a point of pride to look like a woman. I could tell she cared about this, as she put on light makeup and stayed away from the drag look, while at the same time being meticulous to not let even one stray bit of facial hair be visible through her make up. She was usually wearing clothing straight from a department store while other library workers like me were perfectly fine in tee shirts or simple blouses. Alicia would wear a patterned dress, leggings, and heels or a blouse with skirt combination. She just always seemed put together, I guess.

Over time, though, I noticed a change. While we usually worked together and I dropped her off at her house (she lived in the opposite direction, but both of us lived in town) after chatting at work and helping customers, we stopped being scheduled for the same shift, and so we wouldn't talk with each other as much. When I did see her, her hair seemed more frizzy and she looked tired. What was going on? Was everything okay with her?

ALICIA

But now, I'm actually thankful for this. I was able to set up my own schedule when I was self-employed. I worked as a computer tutor, until finally the whole COVID hysteria came.

One week, one lady was leaving for Florida, and I was really pushing myself even though I had a bad cold. The other one let me reschedule, but then rescheduled herself at about 2am. I could only get there at Saturday, when I'd come over on Friday, come back, and found that she wasn't there. It was a mess, and after that one last job, I didn't hear from either of them. I was glad I was freelance though. I really really wouldn't have wanted to work at the library during COVID, and put up with forced masking. I dunno how anyone there put up with this, to be honest. As it was, it became hard to advertise my business so I got frustrated with the whole thing.

## Chapter 10: Church, Church, Church

ALICIA

I was watching a bizarre movie based on a webcomic known as *Marry Me*. In it, a bunch of women dressed as slutty nuns dance about while these lyrics are sung:

*I'm sittin' on top*
*Of cloud number nine*
*Yeah, I'm going up, I'm gettin' so high*
*No, I'm not the same, since you came around*
*You're testin' my faith, I'm prayin' out loud*

*I feel it in my chest*
*I got you in my head*
*I'm putting on my best*
*Like I'm in church, church, church*

*I'm calling out your name*
*And I want to make you proud got me feeling sane*
*So I'm gonna say it loud it's a new day*
*Like I'm in church, church, church, church*

*You make me feel like I'm in Heaven*
*I'm coming out with my confession*
*Like church, church, church, church, church, church, church*
*Like church, church, church, church (yeah)*

*Down on my knees, I've fallen for you*
*You've opened my gates and showed me the truth*
*I'm born again, I'm feeling renewed*
*You showed me the way, I'm baptized in you*

*I feel it in my chest*
*I got you in my head*
*I'm putting on my best*
*Like I'm in church, church, church*

*You make me sing out hallelujah*
*This kind of love will do it to ya*
*Like church, church, church, church, church, church, church*
*Like church, church, church, church*

*Ready to say I do, making this woman true*
*It's the honest to God's truth*
*Church, church, church, church*
*Ready to say I do, making this woman true*
*It's the honest to God's truth*
*Church, church, church, church*

*Yeah baby, I'm in church*
*Church, church, church with you*
*Ooh, I'm in church with you*
*I'm in church with you*

*Hey, hey, hey*
*Lord, almighty*

What does this have to do with anything? Well, ummmm... I grew up with a priest for a father, and although I did have a religious family, I was always more a person who went to religious functions because friends were there. To me, it didn't matter too much about the sermon or the priest as it did the people. Also, I found religion for religion's sake pretentious at best, and hypocritical at worst. My own personal religion was a mash-up of ideas from Christianity with Taoism and Buddhism, and a few of my own beliefs through in. I was more interested in making a religion that was about having people gather for company than heavy dogma or myth that must be believed as gospel.

This was true before I left for Richmond, and it was certainly true while I was in Richmond at work. Since my

story is almost at present, I think it is important for context. When everything else was happening to me, I decided to attend a church. It was a hip coffee-shop style place, that was actually fundamentalist Baptist. But a lot of young people were looking for spiritual direction, and wanted something hardcore. As for me, I eventually switched to a more LGBT-friendly group, though when I moved back home, I chose mainstream churches.

It was getting weird though, like everything else. For example, I went to an anime club where we were watching *Attack on Titan*. In this episode, there was a Titan, but it turned out that it was more or less hollow. The sermon was about how "Sometimes our problems seem big. Enormous, really. But when we look to God, our problems in fact seem hollow." Hmmm, this was the same week and he chose that as a sermon?

At one point, I watched a film called *I'm In Love With a Church Girl*, and something dawned on me. All this time, I had been looking at Fox as some sort of spy. But maybe this was wrong. I thought about the master of disguise angle. Oh sure, there were fat suits and she could wear some kind of leg prosthetic for height, and be very short or something. But even if that were true, I at one point went home quickly to see if I could beat her to a location. I would have had a head start, but she would literally need to either use some kind of underground path or fold time and space while applying a disguise. Even with a team, it didn't seem possible. And

while we're on the topic of a team, there were about 300 or so people that day I tried to meet Fox at the cafe, that sort of thing if it were all planned by paid people would take a gross amount of waste. It would only be feasible with a construction crew and a few people herding the rest.

But there were some weirder events. Like when I was texting to Fox while living at Chris's place, I had to go out for some chores, and she texted back, «Don't get hurt or anything!» Not ten minutes later, I cut up my leg. Short of some kind of suggestion through the phone or outright self-fulfilling prophecy, unlike watching me constantly, this one didn't make much sense. And then there was how I met Sapphire. I needed someone to talk to, and I turned around and she was right there. Or how one day when I was shopping for my sister Willow, I looked all around the store for a certain variety of chicken she wanted. My sister's words were, "I'm sorry I sent you off on a wild goose chase." The very next day when I was shelving at Gargarean, one item randomly sitting there was called *A Wild Good Chase*. There would have been less than twenty-four hours to stock this item on the shelf, and while I was shelving, I was looking randomly through shelves trying to find shelf space. Now there is a field called predictive analytics, but this was God-tier stuff. There was another one during my "storm warning." While I was crying in a dark corner, I saw a film called *Crybaby*. I was confused, nervous, and frankly overworked when I attended church that week.

The pastor said something along the lines during one sermon, "When you are searching for answers, there is a false way that leads to madness, and another way that leads to the truth." Atheists like to use Occam's Razor as though it can only apply to a secular reality, but staring at all these weird events would either require gross resources, technology beyond what I currently know of, and in some instances, a supernatural level of precognition in order to plan some of these things. At the very least, we were looking not at a spy but at a commander of hundreds of other spies. This was implausible for the very reason that I could think of nothing special about myself. Why would an entire army of spies try to work on enlisting me? I had no delusions of grandeur, I knew that I barely had money, usually had no romantic prospects, and I was a self-centered and at times crass and mean person.

But I started to look at this another way, the pastor's way. I remembered the show *X-Files*, and how Dana Scully declared up and down that there were no such thing as psychics, UFOs, etc. She always had the far more convoluted "rational" explanation for things, but almost always turned out to be wrong. Maybe Occam's Razor didn't always side on the rational. Maybe it was time to trust Fox (Mulder?) for a change? And so, I examined Fox's background through the lens of religion. Here was a being who had wide number of followers, but I had not noticed a rise in taxes, so none of them needed payment. Here was someone who didn't care that I would probably not succeed in my mission, but hung

around me regardless. I even saw her as a "trans woman" in an LGBT club. And again as a "trans man" when I did a wedding for a friend. It was a far more explainable notion that I was simply dealing with someone supernatural. And more importantly for me, it meant that I could stop exhausting myself recording every text, trying to find out who she was in disguise. If this was someone who could shapeshift or be in several places at once, I could drop the paranoia and just go with it.

So what sort of supernatural being? A demon? Well, from my understanding, demons were just bad feelings. I had dealt with my own personal demons, and they never seemed to be embodied. Besides, this Fox never attempted to tempt me in any way, night even towards doing good actions. So probably not an angel either. I then thought of the most obvious explanation. After all, her name literally was Fox. And I had watched a show called *My Girlfriend is a Gumiho* (nine-tailed fox). But that was absurd. If fox spirits really existed, why didn't they show themselves to furry fanboys? And so, I thought this idea was implausible. But one thing that did stick out was that I'd mysteriously found not one but two books about accepting yourself. *When Panic Attacks* and *The Gifts of Imperfection* were both about the same topic, what was essentially the secular version of grace. Being able to see that life has given undeserved gifts and that you are seen as better than you might think. Her general lack of larger mission also seemed in line with that idea. I suspected she might have a plan for me, but it was very open-ended, and

largely up to me. I could think of only one being that seemed to fit this profile, and that would be Jesus. I continued going to church, needless to say.

Then there was a third memorable sermon. We were in church, and the priest talked about transfiguration, and how Jesus looked a certain way before, but now was completely changed to a more glorious form. And I thought of how Fox often looked ordinary or sometimes outright dumpy in her various forms, choosing roles that were humble and modest not fashionable or eye-catching. After the sermon, I went to a pig festival (not a barbecue festival, they had all manner of things from pork to bacon to sausage, to even things cooked in pork, and just jewelry). I bought lunch there, and a hamsa, which I think I wore until the chain broke. While there, a Brittany (not not that Britney, a country singer) was singing on the stage. I got her autograph, and she seemed very personally friendly to me, which gave me the idea that this was Fox in her most radiant.

The concert name? Changed. That was it. I was sure now that

she was Jesus.

## Chapter 11: A Bankrupt Theory?

FOX

No, I'm not Jesus. My real name is Rena. But Alicia isn't totally off base.

RENA

You see I met Jesus. But let's get to that. Let's back up a bit. I remember Alethea's last moments, before everything changed. Alethea had moved away from Luminos and Albia to stay near us. We kept close in front of her to guard her from harm, something her parents could not do, no matter how powerful they were. They were too focused on fighting off a horde of demons with the other townspeople.

"*Phase Blast*!" Luminos called out. A pulse of non-elemental energy pummeled the nearby demon, pelting it with tachyons and various forms of radiation. "*Soul Blade*!" Luminos called out. His own chest shimmered around where his heart was, then he drew from the area as though he was unsheathing a sword. Unlike other forms of energy, all but much stronger demons could be killed with a single swipe of radiant energy. The blade went snicker-snack and three nearby demon fall, turning into stardust. Albia was given enough time to complete her prayer and turned a full power Holy Cross on the crowd. Unlike a hastily created Holy Cross, it had great size and piercing power. It drilled through about seventy of the demons before a greater demon used a barrier to break its momentum. I recognized that one. Belial.

Marina had done some tea leaf reading, and we all saw Belial in the future. That particular demon was so powerful that even the Oracle of Tao had originally had trouble against him. Indeed such prophecies predicted the New Earth, which was to come about from the extreme corruption of this world. The two of them fought back and forth, but this battle was predictable brief. A mere human couldn't stand for long against an archdemon, and when his leg was slashed, the group broke through.

"No!" Alethea screamed, seeing her parents in danger, "Noooooooooooooo!!!!" In the background of the town, snow was falling, specks of white on the backdrop of evergreen trees and wooden houses. It would be easy to mistake this for falling snow in the Town of Winter. But I knew better. With quiet focus, she wove the power of the Oracle around, bombarding the demons in the area with the purest light. I recognized this sort of dance called as the Brush Knee Twist Step, which involved waving her hands while turning in a specific pattern. Energy built up, and out came a holy tornado focused on a target at range. Belial took notice.

Most of the demons in the area were blasted away, so Luminos, Albia, and most of the townsfolk were safe for now. But I could see this wasn't to last. "Rena!" Albias called to me, "Get my daughter to safety at all costs! The Earth depends on it." And so, we ran. I turned into my *gumiho* fox form, and the other five got on my back, as I gracefully and

bravely... galloped off. Off in the distance, a dome of dark energy and fire leveled the town.

"I don't think I can keep running forever, guys," I said while still in my fox form, "Also, even as big as this fox form is, you guys are fucking heavy!" Autumntwig, Marina, Aellisa, and Arboria jumped off and huddled together. After a moment of conferring, they all reached a consensus, "Jikū isekai tensei shintai." I gasped, "No..."

Alethea had clearly never heard of this, "What now?" And so, it was my duty to explain the sad details. "Okay," I told her, "It's like this... You won't be you anymore. We're sending you to a new time, a different area of Earth, and a new body. And the five of us will need to find you. This will keep you safe from Belial, until you are ready to decide whether to face him. Belial cannot be allowed to kill you, for your natural rebirth may not have such powers. The Earth needs you." She was shocked, as we were effectively sentencing her to a force reincarnation to keep her save. This all hit me hard, as she was my dearest friend. In fact, had she been male, the two of us might have dated. But now I had to leave her, risking the chance of ever seeing her again if I didn't find her in time. While she would definitely be human, I would have no way of knowing which country she was to be born in, what sex, what race, and even what her face might look like. "Here," I said, "wear this." I handed her a necklace, and then joined hands with her. "*Bind a marker to her using this necklace. If I am near Alethea, let me recognize her.*

*Soulmate!*" I said. I also made a quick prayer to God that my search would be fruitful, and that Belial would not ever be able to find her.

And now, we began the ritual. Each of us were to sacrifice something that we owned. Aellisa gave up a ring that had been made just prior to the Third Age. Arboria gave up clippings of her own sapling. Autumntwig gave up a pet turtle (anything to save Alethea, but she cried for months afterward). Marina scaled her own fins, making her earthbound. And I cut my arms to make the circle, losing about a quart of blood before I closed the wounds with healing. I was seriously woozy, having effectively caused a class 2 hemorrhage on myself. But this had to be finished. "*By the power of fire, I thee sacrifice*," I said, and the blood started burning. "*By the power of water, I thee sacrifice*," Marina said. Her scales turned to water. "*By the power of earth, I thee sacrifice*," Autumntwig said, and the turtle got swallowed up. And so on, until all five elements were used. We joined hands, and the elements bound together in a weave, and then was the words, "*Jikū isekai tensei shintai!*" The energy arced around the circle of blood, then struck her, coating her in rainbow-colored energy. The next moment, she was gone.

There's something you must know. Before recorded history on Earth, all of Earth existed on a single island. You know its name. Pangaea. Winter wasn't the first town to fall, nor was it the last. I gradually learned over time that Alethea was the

goal of the demons all along, as she was the only one powerful to stop their leader Belial. But not only were they searching for where they hid her, but once they were satisfied that she couldn't stop her, they plunged the Earth into a Dark Ages. The remaining towns were also burned down, historical records were destroyed. And the five of us had to go into hiding. So you see, the idea that I was Jesus was totally wrong. But only because you didn't know all the truth.

## Chapter 12: Imitation of Christ

RENA

You see, the feminists, Muslims, Jews, and Gnostics are technically right about Jesus. But these are half-truths spread by the demons. Feminists think Jesus was a woman. Gnostics think that Jesus was a supernatural being rather than fully human (and fully God). Jews think he was a sorcerer and had five disciples (rather than twelve). The Muslims say that Jesus didn't really die on the cross, but Judas died in his place. This is a half-truth, because the second time, someone did die in his place. *Me*. Jesus died once for all, but humanity needed to remember that. But the crucifixion did happen, it just happened in Pangaea, when humans were still struggling not to murder each other. Back then, technology was far more advanced than all that, but we had a long road ahead of us before we behaved decently to each other. The world religions were a system created to teach morals over time. But unfortunately, some time after these morals were taught, they were used as a system to punish people. You stole from

someone? Off with their hand! Adultery? Stoned to death. And then there were all the sacrifices. No amount of morality could really solve the underlying issue that people were fully capable of sacrificing each other. And then things came to a head and Jesus died on the cross thousands of years before he was technically supposed to. But he did in fact die fall sins. And he said and did most of the things mentioned in the Bible. It's just... the Bible is a reprint of much earlier writings. The demons had managed to stamp out belief in God and gods, or corrupt it. So we just revived it.

What, you don't believe me? Well, Baal, Ishtar, and Tammuz are a corruption of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit into a "holy family" (this should sound familiar if you've studied Catholicism) which further devolved over thousands of years into worship of false gods who literally demanded human sacrifice. These were how demons took the existing ancient teachings of the Savior and corrupted them. It's not the first example either. Ancient Egypt had Osiris, Isis, and Horus. This story even included a resurrection story. Norse religion had Odin, Freya, and Thor. Not all of these were a married family, but all were a leader deity, love deity, and son deity, instead of one God with three aspects.

All of this was due to centuries of literal demonic takeover. Unlike the Christians of today, we have no Revelation teaching. Jesus has come again, and can talk to any of us at any time we wish. He also said in no uncertain terms that he came to save the world not to condemn it, it direct opposition

to the teachings of Revelation. This "scripture" was a corruption while the demons were in power.

Having seen all of this play out, the five of us traveled the world spreading religious teachings to help humans spiritually evolve. This was also an important for other reasons. Demons don't like spiritual energy, so this would weaken their hold on the Earth. Humans without faith turn to materialism and tend to destroy each other over petty things like land or money. We also were looking for someone whose power was like a LED lantern among birthday candles. It would greatly help us if his gifts were nurtured in a place where religion was able to be taught.

So Arboria taught Taoism and agriculture. Autumntwig taught the Vedic scriptures and mythological history (notice I didn't say history, most history had become corrupted by Belial). Aellisa taught Shintoism and various types of crafting (particularly jewelry and metallurgy, woodworking, and stone-masonry). Marina got people to shave their heads for Buddhism and taught medicine. And I? Well, as you can guess from my talking, I taught people about Judaism and Christianity. I taught people how to cook, as I loved to bake and make cheese. You have to remember, all this heavy moralism was not the original teaching of each of these religions. Nor was all their violence. While demons were in charge, there was no dancing, no music, and no art. All that existed was war and slavery, and large amounts of sacrifice. So they did their best to corrupt these. Unfortunately, even

my attempt wasn't enough.

Each of us staged the story behind the religion, often acting out the premise. For example, Arboria went to China and then fled the country, teaching Taoism to the border guard. Only, with me, it required quite a lot of planning. I had hoped to use illusions and have help from my friends. But the Romans and the Jews actually did hate Jesus's message. The Romans had religion that was built from Babylonian myth, so they were related to the cult of Baal. The Jews rejected Baal, yes, but also anything that sounded like it was opposed to the rut that Judaism was now stuck in. Which basically meant that no trickery was needed for them to kill Jesus. I mean, to kill me.

I knew history to know that it would play out this way. The real Jesus handled healing and exorcisms. The thing the Bible doesn't tell is that I was actually almost hopeless with exorcism. I can use a few prayers, but most of my power is innate. A burning bush? Easy illusion and flame trick. Driving demons from other people? That bit about followers of Christianity doing greater things than me was true. As humans have no innate powers, prayers are far easier for them. Although I was able to walk on water. What this meant of course, that even had I wanted to, the demons had prepared for us, allowing an angry and possessed crowd to get the better of us. While transformed as a man, I was whipped, had my clothes divided, and lots were tossed for my robe. The reason that I had to be kissed to identify me is

that I was a shapeshifter. And this is also why called me "King of the Jews," to mock the Jews that their "king" was revealed as a woman when worn out to the point where her disguise wouldn't work and stripped naked.

At least my fox traits were kept at bay by a genetic mechanism designed to ensure self-preservation, or Christianity would wind up being taught as a sort of offshoot of Shintoism. I could just see it, "We worship the great fox spirit who died on a cross for us." No, they taught that Jesus was wholly human and wholly divine, which was the doctrine I grew up with. I may have something to do with the Council of Trent and several other such meetings. Though I'm sorry to say that I'm also responsible for the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition. What? Christianity had to survive, and I was convinced that Belial had a hand in Islam's founding. None of us came up with that idea, and it seemed to ban music and art (the same things that were nonexistent when demons were in power), encourage violence, and offer license to rape, murder, enslave, and kill. Also, I'd asked my friends later and none of them admitted to founding it. Even though Islam was right about Jesus not dying on the cross (that time), the only way they could have known that was through inside information.

I suspect even though we failed to teach the real religions as had been taught to us, instead creating copies of the originals, it was still enough to raise the nature of humanity beyond what was comfortable for demons like Belial. Yes,

even with the violent revolutions like the Protestant Reformation, things were still getting less violent than when religion was absent. And this was the point, the world was getting more and more peaceful, despite appearances. That is, until more than 1400 years of bloody Muslim conquest, followed by atheism and its socialist policies creating loads of people killed for not wanting to give up property. The point being that even copy-pasted religion was better than no religion or a religion that taught the principles of the demons. And despite these Crusades and such, humanity moved from living in caves and no running water to hygiene, toilets, and electricity. Where before it was unsafe to go out at night, now the streets were lit to the point where stars couldn't even be seen. Even mundane lights were starting to become a threat to demons, so they influenced the leaders of the world to pass climate restrictions or use "cleaner" less efficient light bulbs that were harder to dispose of. All of this to prevent light from prevailing on them.

But none of this mattered to me right now. I had just been whipped a bunch, and now they expected expected me to carry a large beam of wood. Uhhhhh, maybe if you wanted that, you should have whipped me after I got there? Anyway, a couple of murderous robbers and I got to our location, after a fashion. While I was lying on my back, some burly men penetrated me... in the wrists and feet with some nails, you pervert. They then hauled the cross into an upright position. The force of my own mass would typically make me hang down but be unable to lift myself up, resulting in slow

suffocation. But I had a lot of back wounds, so instead I just passed away from blood loss. That part about "forgive them for they know not what they do," that was from the original Jesus story not me. The same with all the graves opening. To be honest, I wanted nothing so much as to burn down the cross and be left alone, but I was tired, and I was facing a bunch of demon-possessed people hungry for me to be punished. There was simply no way to win.

My body was dragged into a stone tomb while I was out of it. I got to see the Afterlife for a brief period, then I felt a warm touch, as I heard some soft words. *Arise, my child*. I gasped for air as I regained life and consciousness all of a sudden. "Hey there," said Jesus, "I think it's good that you're teaching the people about me, but it's not required for you to be me. Not unless you want to or whatever." Jesus was not like he's depicted in paintings. I mean, when I met him first, he made me Judas and I was just a stupid teenager. I want you to imagine less of a human and more a being that is part of humanity. I guess the closest analogy would be like a spy, someone who just appears out of nowhere. They're real, but things like walls and physical space don't really mean anything to them anymore. Jesus could appear and disappear at will, talk through other people, or appear as multiple people at once. All of this made it easy for him to aid humanity as a whole, but there was a remoteness to this. While he was human, people in general regarded him as "coming again soon" instead of able to notice that he had already returned long ago. The Second Coming, as far as I

understood, was a lie. But I had no way of convincing anyone of this. After all, the average person couldn't see Jesus after he died, so they believed the lie of the Second Coming, instead of the truth that he was among us.

Jesus walked over to the stone in this cave and simply touched it with his finger. Had a cleric or spellcaster tried to affect the stone, I would have seen runes float around, or at the very least some sort of nonverbal effect like a silent version of Disintegrate or Blast of Wind. But this was beyond any of that, doing the equivalent of a Repulsion effect without any runes, light, or energy expense. As it was, it would personally have taken me a lot of effort in order to move the same rock. "There you are," he said. When Jesus appeared to people again, it was probably about half and half. I gave some lame story about how people couldn't touch me because hadn't yet ascended, but he was the one who outright moved through closed doors and stuff. That was just impossible stuff, after all.

## Chapter 13: Tracking

### RENA

All of which leads to the present. Well, sort of. While we knew it might be awhile before we found Alethea, the actual process of tracking her down was a daunting task.  This is part of why we spent so much time developing humanity, we wanted to get aid to this task. The necklace that I gave Alethea before she left this world to be reborn had a unique signature. In addition to creating religions, I also developed

spy networks all across the Earth. With the use of technology, I had the sensor from my necklace copied and mass produced as a rather innocuous charm, a crucifix. The charm would simply swing quickly like a pendulum if it found a child that met the description. And so, I staffed every hospital with at least one of my agents. Of course, there was always the option that the child could be born at home. So I helped make a law that all children needed birth certificates issued at hospitals.

I really did have spies enough to populate an entire town. But I wasn't part of the CIA or FBI or anything like that. Rather, it was a loosely governed private organization, where all members wore these cross necklaces in order to seek out my savior, the one who would free us from the evil of Belial. Using old power of the thaumaturgy and the latest technology, I knew it would only be a matter of time before I discovered the object of my search. But centuries had passed with no results. I wasn't told this would happen soon though, so I had no reason to expect an easy wait. In fact in the 3.3 million years of supposed human history, and the 300 million years of actual human history, 200 million of those I spent waiting after Pangaea broke up, and 250 million years ago was when the Great Dying was caused by demons (they killed nearly everything off, not just humans). While I could be killed, I had everlasting life. And so I played a long game of helping human evolve after the demons killed off everything but the lowest life forms.

They weren't kidding in Daniel when they said that the kingdom of God could not be overthrown. Jesus established this kingdom, and even though he himself had died, even though all humans were killed off, even though most of the world was hit by the demonic equivalent of nuclear energy, humans were reborn on this Earth again and again, foiling all attempts to snuff them out. Neither could the Earth be totally destroyed. All they succeeding in doing was destroying history, but nothing was truly lost. The story of Noah was not about a flood, but the restoration of human life. The story of Babel was about humans under demonic rule, where everyone was forced to build monstrous towers. And yet, humans were restored, in much the same way as the valley of dry bones.

Long story short, it was a long wait even for humans to show up again, and then to be civilized enough that Alethea would be reborn. This gave ample time to come up with a system for tracking her. The world map blipped in a place called Sharon Court (Sharon Ct) in Richmond, Virginia. I had expected for Alethea to be born, but I guess I had misunderstood the spell. The child was found crying by the side of the road and taken to the nearest hospital. Our agent there was Sister Benedict.

BENEDICT

All was according to plan. Soon the child would be stabbed and with that, Belial promised me power beyond belief. I had collected the child from his parents (though they told me that

they had found the child along the road and wanted to adopt), and was reaching for the scalpel...

RENA

I never trusted Sister Benedict. But I kept her in the agency precisely because she was driven and sure to find a child that fit the description. So when I saw the blip, I rushed over immediately with the fastest transport I could find, which in this case was a Gate. No sooner did she try to stab the child than I immolated her with Foxfire, and the scalpel clattered to the floor unused. This was my most powerful effect because it was one of the few that could burn away possessing demonic influence from a person's body or defeat demons themselves. In two thousand years since being powerless against demons, I had finally mastered it. It was very painful though, meaning that when the people who had left the baby walked in, they saw what appeared to be me burning a nurse alive. After telling them, "Wait, no, it's not what it looks like!" I proceeded to show them that Foxfire couldn't actually hurt humans unless they were under demonic influence. Not that they were any less freaked out by the fact that I could use magic.

And actually it's harder than it seems to actually become under demonic influence. We see all these films where demons possess someone forcibly or tempt them, or some other cliched and misunderstood aspect of demons. Well, I'm happy to tell you that it doesn't work this way. But unfortunately, the way it works means you can be tempted

without ever coming into contact with a demon.

Allow me to explain. Contrary to stories that Satan goes around tempting people and then taking their souls, Satan is actually an accusing angel. But even if we are speaking of true demons like Belial, such a thing still doesn't play out that way. Our souls are given by God and cannot be taken (we can only be tricked into thinking our souls are gone and that we are condemned), nor can our bodies be taken without permission. Likewise, human evil exists on its own, with or without demonic possession. To become possessed requires either great willingness or great weakness. Willingness is easy to explain. You can be possessed by using a Ouija board, or by trying to trade for political power or money, or by using certain branches of sorcery. As for weakness, a person got possessed if they were depressed, lonely, seeking vengeance, or obsessed.

In any case, she wasn't possessed anymore, and would soon be arrested for attempted murder of a child. But the parents were another story. They wanted me to leave, and the child himself was crying inconsolably. Poor thing. He was traumatized! "Hey, hey, take it easy! The nurse was trying to kill this child," I explained, "In fact, if you keep him, there's a risk that *you* might be killed."

The man seemed angry, "We have been trying since we were twenty. Ten years! And the adoption agency wouldn't agree to give us a child because I don't have a steady job." I had money from my work in spying, as did all the agents of

mine. I made it by helping small corporations do investigations. And occasionally, I helped jealous husbands. Over the years, I had built up quite a tidy sum. It was time to use it. All of it. I had lost her before, and so I gave up everything I had to get her back. Well, him now. "No worries! This should cover you to adopt a baby." More than that, it was enough that they would not have to work again until retirement. I recommended that he put the money in the bank in small yearly increments or just keeping it in a safe or something. Since it was a gift, anything too visible would screw with their taxes.

The exchange was made. From there, I delivered him to my most trusted allies within the agency, both of which had knowledge of the thaumaturgy. Alexander was a talented priest, while Bianca was an agent who we used whenever someone saw a UFO or something. "*Rewrite Memory*!" she said to the couple, making them forget this whole event. As far as they knew, they had met at the hospital to check whether she was pregnant and had once again been disappointed. We removed the nurse's unconscious body from the area while they were blinking and Bianca was telling them recent events before pretending to be hospital administration. She recommended that next they go to the adoption clinic. They chose a teenage girl who looked like she hadn't been picked by anyone. That girl would later care for them in their old age.

While I wanted the child now called Emett to know about

me eventually, right now was dangerous, so Bianca tried to erase his memory. Again and again she tried, but to no avail. The child, even at a young age, demonstrated that he could recopy complicated maps. A photographic memory. Moreover, when I tried to use magic to revise the timeline to test whether we could trick him with the Mandela Effect, it proved ineffective. As a simple test, I went back in time, and this time the merged copy of me didn't draw a map for him, but still told him to recopy the map. After a moment, he proved that his memory was effectively rippleproof. I tried this several other times over the years, as did Belial, but there was always the same result. Even though everyone else said he remembered wrong, he maintained what he remembered. I suspected it had something to do with the ritual and being reborn outside of time. But I wasn't sure.

What was somewhat effective were different types of therapy. We employed a therapist to spend years in hypnosis and conditioning until he instead remembered that the source of his tears were a maternal grandmother dying, not witnessing his own attempted murder and someone being zapped by magic. Autumntwig also cast a number of illusions on him to replace his real memories with false ones. I fear that I damaged his mind with this approach. Over the years, I noticed that his memories from the past life kept bleeding through, along with strange reactions to people based on his early childhood. We did manage to get him to focus on new memories but repeatedly showing him pictures and other props, which we coupled with powerful illusion.

For the most part, he lost this perfect memory, which I felt was more a curse than a blessing to him anyway. But even with his mind screwed up by illusions, any attempt to alter the timeline had no effect on him. Autumntwig and Arboria stayed with him, in order to watch after him. They posed as older brother and sister, even though Autumntwig was technically a girl. For most of his adult life, these "siblings" were under a powerful Glamour, while the gnome was also feeding him illusions. Autumntwig was there to keep his memories normal, at least until he accepted these new memories, while Arboria had a different mission. This new Alethea needed a friend. Emett was so fragile after the even that unless he had some way of forming relationships, no amount of false images would be enough to prevent permanent damage. Gradually, this became the job of both girls. Rough and ready Autumntwig would teach him wrestling, and at one point, how supply and demand worked. To help him explain to himself why he felt like a girl, she would dress him in drag for a short play as a child. Arboria taught him Taoism, just as she taught a whole section of the world. In this case, she claimed that an ex-boyfriend left behind a copy of the *Tao te Ching*. For the most part, he grew up as a normal kid. I was a recurring friend of his, trying to keep him company and be a good companion, since I knew his life would be extremely rough until he was an adult. I appeared in several forms, but it became increasingly difficult as he got older. As a boy, he wasn't interested in me, as most males by this point were increasingly interested in

sports and similar things. And as a girl, I wasn't much good to him either, on account that male hormones were finally making him attracted to women. This attraction was at odds with his former body, and would make him remember. We still needed time! I had given him Ritalin as a child, acting as a school medic, which had the effect of subduing him and getting him to focus on school rather than too much on other details (such as the oddity of his reality). During his early teens, we used low voltage electricity magic on him to get his body to shake , then diagnosed him as having seizures. This particular drug was needed to suppress some of his emotions. After four years, and a trip to South Africa, we declared him "symptom free" and allowed him to finally stop taking them. He was lonely and depressed, and it wasn't good for him to be alone, regardless of risk. And after an attempted ask for a date blew up in his face, he stopped taking the Ritalin too, recognizing that the drug seemed to make him nervous and awkward. Other than that, you know the rest. He first noticed me in college when he was off both medicines. He focused on me for quite awhile, trying to come to some sort of conclusion. For anyone else, it would be creepy, but for me, it was kind of flattering. That was the start of all of this, when I finally knew he noticed me out of all other people.

## Chapter 14: What Next?

### ALICIA

So let's see. I talked about my past, I talked about various jobs, and even about religious stuff sorta. This day, my

mother was making rollover pastries using brie and homemade fig jam, and my father needed random things for making sandwiches at the Lions club. It was a slow rainy day punctuated by activity around me, and not much activity from me. I was expecting a package from Amazon but otherwise nothing was going on. I had told a friend named Sinan online who had read my other writings about all of this. He/she was interested in cryptography and was interested in the language I made, comparing it to an obscure language called Toki Pona. He/she shared their thoughts about the spy, and I told how I know Fox was a spy because she was too available. I tried to get in touch with Momo after that to ask her thoughts on the book, but she said right now she was dealing with stuff and was just too busy. Exactly as planned.

Currently, I was mostly unemployed, writing my various thoughts as a memoir, trying to make sense of things. I had supposed it would be okay to just live the rest of my life out peacefully, not worrying too much about anything. In the background, and just Netflix and chill for the rest of my days.

RENA

That wouldn't do at all! I had no objection to her not working, as frankly money was only useful if used towards a purpose. My own agency fluctuated from rich and poor, depending on how many agents we had active at any one point, and how many of them were earning money at it. Currently, we were hemorrhaging a lot of money watching

after Alicia, and many of them wanted to quit. I told them honestly that it was up to them, as I understood that I had sunk a lot of personal cost in this goal, and it wasn't necessarily everyone's goal. Pretty soon, roughly 9/10 of my staff went on to greener pastures, leaving just my four friends, and those truly devoted to our cause. Some of them joined other spy groups, other rejoined civilian life. I sent Christmas cards to them, but respected that they now had their own lives. And mine was Alicia now.

So no, I didn't care whether Alicia had a full-time job, a part-time job, or even no job at all. But I did care that she seemed lonely, or that she might be all too willing to just back to sleep and leave things as they are. ***Wake up!*** I said. And so, I gave her work to get her to face the world. The symbols she used to interpret the world flooded his every waking moment, until she was forced to face the illusion of his past. I am sorry I was so hard on her, but it needed to be done.

As for his obvious suspicion that Momo was obviously me, I let her think what she wanted. But Momo was actually one of my agents instead. Probably. Or maybe a random stranger that I allowed her to meet because she was lonely and needed a friend to talk to who wasn't part of all of this. Maybe? Or maybe Alicia was right about Momo. I deliberately left it open-ended so no matter what the conclusion, Momo could bring him some friendship and happiness. So too with several of her other friends, because I didn't want Alicia thinking

everyone was me. That wasn't a healthy fixation, I figured. And yet despite giving her friends to meet with and talk to, I kept up the pressure until that illusion that she had from her childhood cracked. "What the hell..." she said, just before a violent seizure flooded her brain (unlike the past "seizures" this one was real) as she finally remembered the years of memories buried under false experiences.

ALICIA

I thought I had a mostly normal childhood. But it turned out that I was wrong. My mind suddenly and with great finality broke all of the illusions I'd ever seen. I remember Fox was Rena. I remembered when I was very young, how Rena rescued me from a violent nurse nun, and suddenly my perpetual fear of hospitals made sense. I had always thought it had to do with being over-medicated and having probes stuck in my head when I supposedly had seizures. I remember the way her touch felt as she carried me to the people who were supposed to be my parents. I remember that I had no real parents because these were from a previous life, and I remember the "dream" I had now in full detail and clarity. I was Alethea, a woman, trapped inside the body of a man named Emett. I now wore women's clothing occasionally, as I had taken a genderfluid lifestyle, so my name was now Alicia.

I remembered that I was not born in Sharon, Connecticut (Sharon, CT) but Sharon Court (Sharon Ct) in Richmond, along the roadside. I was moved to an undisclosed new

location for the first few years of my life, while I was systematically worked on by professionals to bury my memories in such a way that my photographic recall didn't work properly. But now it did. I looked at a picture once, and started to draw every detail. I wasn't the best artist, but my picture did contain every house, fence, tree, and pet that could be seen.

I knew everything done to me. One of the agents was a creeper and molested me, as I expected, but Rena confronted him upon discovering it, and unceremoniously ate his liver. Had she only cut part of it away, it would have regrown eventually, but she went all *Temple of Doom* on him. The liver, it turns out, is actually more important to the body than even the heart, as within minutes he bled out. It turns out that blood passing through the liver every minute is a pretty big deal. Also without a liver to clean the poisons in his body, all the food and water he had recently consumed became impure. It was disturbing to watch and I was glad to have forgotten it. But in some ways, I was relieved that I had a fox girl looking out for my well-being. She kinda spat it out right after, because the idea of a gumiho eating humans livers was an old wives' tale. Foxes are omnivorous, and while they like animal liver, human liver isn't really their thing. Foxes tend not to harm humans or many pets (besides maybe rabbits or birds). It was just to punish him for mistreating me.

I knew that lightning runes were used on me to induce a seizure. I knew that Autumntwig dressed me up to make me

feel less insecure about being reborn as a male. I knew that the people in my classes at school were actually tanukis, elves, and other beings mixed in among real humans.

In fact, I was not only able to break the illusion of my past, but also other illusions. Angels, fey, demons, and other beings lived among us, usually enacting a Glamour of some sort. Swamp creatures ran the government (literally, they were called saurians, and they loved being in power because it meant they could inflict pain). On a bus ride I took, a lady across from me was a vampire, and a man two seats back was a kappa. They often had medical conditions matching what they were. For example, she had no ability to process iron, and a vitamin D deficiency because she couldn't synthesize sunlight. He had male pattern balding and a sweaty scalp. Magic, sorcery, and the thaumaturgy had been hidden in plain sight all of this time, and fantasy stories about it had all been true. And yet, aside from very simple effects, I did not how to use any magic. I walked out into a forest, ignoring the «Private Property: No Trespassing» signs, continuing further until I was past posted zones and into a part of the forest that nobody owned. I moved my hands as I remembered how I saw the thaumaturgy used. In retrospect, moving to a forest to use a fire was not the best move. But it made no difference. "*Fire!*" I called out, attempting to draw all of the runes from inside my body, mixing them with the outside world. This was the theory behind how both magic and thaumaturgy worked, the *dantian* system drew energy from the spiritual circulation starting from the stomach and

flowing through the heart and mind. Sorcery was a little different, you could do weird things like pulling from ley lines or from other people's energy. But in any case, unless I had some sort of blockage or deviation, I should have been able to do this. I focused harder, probably looking constipated to anyone who might have walked up to me then, trying to focus everything I had into making even a small spark. "***Fire!!!***" I said, followed by, "Dammit to hell!" A voice behind me giggled, "That's not how it works for you." A moment later, Arboria stepped out of an oak tree. No, not stepped out from behind an oak tree. Actually, I saw her body move out from within it.

She made a beckoning motion as one might signal for a cat to come closer, only to have the cat scoff and move in some other direction. But I was not a cat. "Yeah, you," she said, "Come with me, I'll take you to Rena. She'll straighten you out." And so, I walked with her, past the forest, crossing a small river, heading up a hill near an old grain silo, until we came to a desolate-looking house. But now I could see through illusions. Built in the middle of the forest was pretty sweet pad.

## Chapter 15: The Farm

### ALICIA

And by pad, I mean a combination villa and home base. Surrounded by alpine woods, rocks, and shrubbery, the place had a cobblestone platform at its base that extended up further near where it had a small fireplace. The heat didn't go

through a chimney though, as it had a more advanced system that funneled the heat through the house with no smoke and very little lost energy. The parts of the two-story house that weren't cobblestone were simple lines of wood and metal. It was a postmodern forest cottage, with asymmetrical roofing and enough glass that a stray rock would threaten to bring down the entire left side. It was a good thing that the other side was built substantially more sturdy. Much like Las Vegas, this building was more than slightly in contrast with its surroundings but the hardwood frame made it blend better. Something about the building lent to the perception that it was a temporary dwelling spun from rock and ore deep beneath the Earth together with nearby trees. I half-expected it to grow chicken feet and uproot itself. In any case, I didn't see how the occupants could manage it. After all, they had followed me around where I went, so there must be a trick.

I was ushered into their place. Honestly, I felt like I was back in Fox's family home or her apartment. Both of these places felt like a makeshift home rather than a real dwelling. Again, I felt like this house could be uprooted at any time. And so I asked her, "How exactly did you stay in contact with me? I mean, we moved a lot over the years, and took a lot of vacations, but no matter where I went, you always stayed nearby." It was different seeing Rena in her true hybrid form, after seeing her in disguise for so long. I took it all in. She was a gumiho, of course, but specifically a white marble red fox. She had long platinum hair with soft purple eyes and pale skin. She was beautiful.

The white fox was a beloved creature of the Shinto deity Inari, but that sort of white fox was actually an arctic fox. The marble fox is a domesticated variety, so while it's wild, it can't necessarily survive without human intervention. But they don't necessarily admit that to themselves. They nip, they sometimes pee all over the place, and they have far more feral instincts than a dog but at the same time they are out of place in temperate forests and they tend to get hunted before they grow up. If they do grow up, they are red foxes not white foxes, and cannot survive in the same cold places. But a marble fox could learn to survive, it's just that they are first target for whatever wants to hunt them, and unlikely prospects for mating. On the other hand, they are incredibly cute, so dogs, cats, and people just want to cuddle them and protect them. Bottom line, they still have the wandering and feral instincts of foxes, but a certain vulnerability about them.

But neither were they codependent like a dog, they needed to do their own stuff. Since she was a red fox (even though her coat appeared white as a result of selective breeding), she behaved like one instead of a white fox. This meant territorial behavior, while arctic foxes were den creatures.

Non-domestic red foxes live everywhere include deserts, forests, plains, and tundras. But lately, even wild foxes have learned how to live in urban environments almost as well as humans. They tend to play around in cemeteries and backyards, scavenging random food. A real fox lives in cities and towns, but often in abandoned places. She answered my question, "Aellisa, show them."

The others went outside quickly, so I followed suit. Rena explained, "Each of us learned at least one new ability while we were waiting for you. Marina learned how to temporarily give others the ability to sing by writing sheet music. I uhhhh, that concert you got my autograph in? I wouldn't have been very impressive if I hadn't read her songs. I learned how to do my Foxfire thing (that took a lot of years), and how to shapeshift other people for long periods. I think you know without me explaining just how complicated Autumntwig's illusions have gotten. As for Aellisa..." Aellisa interrupted, "I think I can show her myself."

Extending her arms ahead of her, she spun them about much like someone doing macramé. There were no words uttered, since this was racial ability. The house folded in on itself, collapsing into a tiny wicker ball. "Oh I have so many

questions," I said, "Starting with, what the hell was that? Then, if I was inside, would I have been killed? And after that, are the beds here comfortable?"

She took deep breath, then answered the questions in reverse order, "Ummm, yes the beds are comfy, and you're our friend, of course we want you to stay. No, you usually wouldn't be killed unless I burned the wicker ball with you inside it. But you would be trapped. And umm the earliest one... that was my Matter Reshaping ability. I can reform nonliving objects into any form I want, like so..." And then she demonstrated by turning the wicker ball into a full-sized ladder to nowhere.

"And after that," Arboria explained, "we just haul our home around us." Taking me hand and walking toward a tree, she teased, "C'mon, little brother!" She made a little portal in the tree for all of us to walk through. A moment later, I came out in Central Park in New York, where before I had been in a forest near my current home. "So long as there is a tree nearby, I can travel here," she explained.

I wanted to know, what did she do where there are no trees? So I asked her. She gave a long and complicated explanation that involved a rant about what a nuisance airports are, especially after the whole COVID thing. "In general, though?" Arboria said, "We just follow you in disguise in those cases."

I was led to the dining room to wait, while Rena prepared things she liked. The meal set before us was suited for

omnivores, but a sort of odd mix of *table d'hôte* and buffet style dining. That is, Arboria could technically eat meat, but unlike humans, she could get sufficient nutrients from an all vegetable diet. Meanwhile, Marina had a restrictive diet, so Rena made her some kelp and seafood, avoiding carbohydrates, and most land meat. Her meal resembled a Japanese meal without the rice.

For the rest of us, large plates were placed in the center of the table, and we were able to rotate the inner part of the table to grab what we wanted. Rena had cooked rice and a sort of starchy pancakes used for wrapping food, along with noodles. There were steamed or braised vegetables, cooked just enough to retain their flavor without making any of them bitter. Bok choy, mustard greens, collard greens, and radish greens were cooked together in vaguely Chinese dishes and well seasoned. Pickled or fermented vegetables were also a thing, with both kimchi and natto, along with things like radish pickles. But all of this only made up a third of the dishes on the table. Rena clearly favored meat, with the majority being beef, chicken and other poultry, and fish. There were some prepared insect dishes, organ meats, and eggs on the table as well. I noticed Peking Duck on the table, and Rena handed me some pancakes to eat it with. Rena on the other hand, it turned out really did like liver, just not human liver. She loaded up on chicken livers, wolfed down some grilled foie gras, and then ate an entire game hen. I noted that the way Rena ate while she was acting human was substantially different from when she was free to be a fox,

comparing the perfect table manners before with just eating what she wanted. I was tempted to draw a comparison with reality TV like *The Bachelor* and the meals they show for the set versus the meals the people were actually allowed to eat. Still, the way she cooked was very much *haute cuisine*, with dishes paired with each other to create an overall menu and sauces perfectly suited for each dish. There was reindeer smothered in a berry sauce, there was rabbit prepared with wine and fresh herbs, there was wild boar. I suspected that some of this food was actually hunted from nearby forests (or stolen from nearby farms) rather than bought at the store, as it tasted very fresh and was prepared with a minimum of salt (except for pickled food, obviously).

As we ate, I asked about how she was doing all this time, and would up getting a pretty good history lesson that could probably be covered in previous chapters of this book. But the highlights of it that I focused on were thing that weren't. In between munching on a tendon, she said, "...No really, the French Revolution had nothing to do with liberty or equality, and everything to do with demons. Unlike the American Revolution where they were actually fighting for freedom, they immediately followed it with violent beheadings and with trying to impose new systems for measurement, timekeeping, and so on. Real revolutions don't involve immediately trying to take control, they are about freeing people from real oppression." To this, Marina got in a heated discussion, mentioning the Great War of Atlantis, and how the rules set up after that were needed in order to keep the

peace between wars on land and those on water.

The two of them argued back and forth about some war I'd never even heard of, until finally I interrupted, "I've been meaning to ask, what exactly is the plan of these demons? Is it just destruction? Like, why did they attack my town in the first place?" At that, all eating ceased, and the mood turned serious.

Marina explained this one, "Well, you probably know that they were hunting for you. " I nodded, "Yes, but why?!? I mean, I used some strange holy whirlwind ability, but I haven't even been even able to make a flame after that. Just some simple sensory abilities and sorta being able to adjust my body temperature." She nodded, "I figured as much. Well, maybe it would be best to explain what happened when you were gone." She told in depth about how demons had destroyed almost all towns in Pangaea. The remaining towns, they waited a few generations for people to forget, and gradually poisoned their minds, teaching them magic, and eventually sorcery. I hadn't heard this part before, "Why would they do that? Weren't they worried that humans would have more power to fight them with?"

Rena grabbed a prism from a nearby room, and used it to split light by way of explanation, "Think of thaumaturgy as like this light over here. It is pure and combined, so a flame made through thaumaturgy is every bit like actual fire and can damage things that are resistant to magic. This was later called solid spells, when all knowledge of the true value of

thaumaturgy is gone. There is radiant magic, but unlike that made by thaumaturgy, it can only injure demons, while the other usually kills lesser demons in a single hit. This is because the power is broken up, like this prism." She pulled out a black cloth and placed it in the path of the broken light, "This is what sorcery is like. Not only is it further corruption of the already corrupted magic, but it leaves only a shadow of power that had already been split. Now neither magic nor even sorcery can actually be called evil, but they are distorted from as God intended, *kiseki*, the power of miracles." She paused to let this sink in, "Such powers are no threat to demons, not without massively reworking them to focus on generating holy power. However, they seem on the surface to be very powerful because they are effective at killing other humans. I think you can understand where this is going, right?"

I definitely did, "So basically, they kept getting involved in stupid magical wars and killed themselves off." Rena corrected me, "Well, violence from magic and sorcery was substantial, but the population bounced back after wars. Demons used the fact that people couldn't totally kill their enemies to talk them into bigger and more powerful weapons, until finally they were told about a stone that later became pitchblende." I asked, "You mean, it became known as pitchblende?" She shook her head, "It *became* pitchblende, when before it was a regular stone. This was the ultimate sorcery, the magic of Creation and Destruction. Other elements are fused together to make uranium, then

uranium releases large amounts of energy as a bomb. The Brahmastra and the Gayatri sutra. Under the advice of demons, they used these powers on each other over and over until there were no more humans. After that, demons continued to use their powers until there was almost no more life. We hid until they ran out of steam. I suppose they might have continued if a Prohibition had not been placed on it, banning demons from ever using it again. We survived by hiding." Talking about ancient nuclear spells had definitely turned the mood somber. I decided to grab some dessert while I listened. "So what is the demon's goal?" I asked while munching on some red bean buns covered with black sesame seeds, "And what exactly is yours?"

Rena answered, "Well, at first we thought it was simply to destroy humanity, but since humanity as a species regenerated entirely despite trying a few times to wipe it out, it seemed their plan was instead to oppress them. Humans would eventually master the thaumaturgy if they knew how to use magic again. And so, the demons worked on getting religious people to fear all magic (including the thaumaturgy) as witchcraft. I guess you could think of it as a sort of supernatural gun control. With humans now disarmed, demons could take over governments and cause pain and suffering. This is also why despite all of the fantasy stories ever published, the overall population does not believe magic is real. Our mission is to remind them of their power so that humans can finally live as God intended them, free from governments, demons, and any pain but what they have

caused. And it's to remind you of your power, so that you can stand against Belial."

"Now, about my powers..." I said. Rena spoke up, "Ah yes, about that. The reason that you can't use magic or thaumaturgy or other normal effects is because you are the Oracle of Tao." I was visibly confused, so she volunteered additional information, "You don't have the typical blessings of thaumaturgy that other humans have. Nor do you have some of the normal blessings of humans. That is, when other humans have good or bad luck, you have no luck. Normal humans can for instance plant seeds and have them grow quickly enough to eat. Those with strong magic could say something like *tuatha authrock mora hoatha* or maybe *let this bean/herb/kumquat grow big and strong* and have it grow instantly, or have things grow overnight without doing a thing. But you wouldn't be able to have anything grow for you at all, not for awhile anyway. And I assume you've realized that your ability to hold a job or a girlfriend is pathetic." ***Hey!*** That's harsh. "But why is that?" I asked. She shrugged, "Just as the original Jesus came well before the empire of Rome, the real Lao Tzu tried to leave Pangaea, writing his words before he did. One of these was a vague mention of the Oracle of Tao. We understand the basics of your power, but nobody has any understanding of it. But we do know that it has a very strong tie to *tai chi* and prophetic understanding. One of the things mentioned was the ability to see events before they happen and learn things before being taught. Tomorrow, we'll try to help you figure it out.

But for now, we're going to watch some movies and play video games." I thought this was a perfectly logical tangent between food and talking about demons and the near-destruction of the Earth. In any case, Rena did nothing without a purpose, even if the purpose seemed to be fun. We watched *Christmas Perfection* which was about an insane perfectionist who got stuck in a "perfect" Christmas village until she realized that she liked things messy (and she loved the other guy), followed by *Willow* which was a story of a non-human protecting a powerful chosen human, and the video game *Final Fantasy X* about a sports star who tries to save the world from an unstoppable being that seems to be immune to all attacks except for a final attack used against him. Autumntwig had second dinner with all the leftovers while watching us play.

After this long orgy of media, we tucked in for the night. As a genderfluid person, I had sorta lived halfway in between genders, mostly living as a male at my house, but Rena told me that now was the time to test my comfort zone. She put some cream all over my body that at first I thought was a depilatory, but it made the hair on my scalp tingle and the hair everywhere else feel like it was burning. "What the hell is this stuff?!?" I said, obviously disturbed by the sensation. "This," she explained, "is feminization cream. It doesn't make you turn into a female or anything dramatic like that. That would be magic, not a cream. But it makes your chest muscles softer and your face smoother, it makes hair fall out and never grow again in places where women generally don't

get hair and it makes hair grow back even from slight balding where they do get hair. You will still need to wax your legs or something though."  She spread it over me, and true to advertising, and balding I had on my scalp started to tingle and grow, while all my facial, back, or chest hair loosened. My eyebrows also appeared to thin. I took a shower and it slid off. While in the shower, Rena came in and shaved my leg and underarm hair while my naked body was working out what to make of her large breasts and nice hips, and all too obviously naked body sharing quite a bit of proximity. The real Rena, not the Kat Fox persona, had some interesting notions about boundaries, much like a real fox that would sit on your computer or important papers even while aware that your were glowering at them. We got out of the shower, and she started applying breast forms, a bra, and panties. She tucked my crotch even though I had done this before and it was wildly inappropriate. "I uhhhh... probably should do that myself," I tried to explain, but she would have none of it. "No, no, I need to tuck you in because you're getting hard," she explained.  I didn't want to tell her that I was getting hard because she was touching me down there. Her fingers was very gentle, after all.  She gave me some nude pantyhose and a nightgown, and I settled into the bed, sleeping on my side. No sooner did I start to get comfortable when a pair of arms wrapped about my waist, and a pair of breasts rubbed against my back. "Sorry," Rena said, "there weren't enough beds so I have to share one with you." I always slept alone anyway, so I guess some company was okay.

RENA

That was a total lie. There were beds in the attic and basement, and Aellisa could make more furniture if she wanted to. I don't know when it happened, but all the years I spent waiting for Alethea, and then suddenly here was her reincarnation in my house, and I couldn't keep my hands off of her. Hopefully, she wasn't too creeped out by my advances. The last thing I wanted was to come across as clingy or possessive and drive her away from me. But I needed her.

## Chapter 16: Training

RENA

I got Alicia up at four in the morning for a long day to try to get her into fighting shape. I pounced on to of her which freaked her out. "Aaaaaaaaahhh!!!" she screamed. The weight on her panties pressed something down below loose, and I felt something happy (probably from me sleeping nearby) rub against my leg. She blushed, and fumbled under her blanket until she was smooth down there again. "Ummm, Rena? It's 4am. Why did you wake me up?" she asked.

I kept the sternness of a drill officer, but inwardly I was smirking (for I enjoyed messing with her), "It's time to get training! I expect fifty sit-ups, forty push-ups, thirty-five squats, and then you need to put me on this leash and walk me. But first..." I looked at her face, now feminized so it would never grow hair again, "We need to take a shower, and then you need to put on makeup and look presentable."

ALICIA

She got in the shower with me again. I was going to have to tell her one day that regular humans tended to have boundaries about personal space, but Rena probably didn't understand the concept. As far as she as concerned, I was basically hers, whether her friend or her only hope against Belial or whatever else she considered me. As she scrubbed from my legs, up my hips, touching my member with her soft hands and long nails, all the way up my chest and back, I struggled not to be aroused but in all other ways, I felt surprisingly comfortable. I suppose that I should have felt violated, but strangely it felt like two girls washing each other. While she started rubbing my scalp with shampoo, I decided to try something that was outside my comfort zone.

I started washing her as well. Not wanting to hit her in the head by bending over while she was scrubbing me, I waited until she was done, then squatted down and started washing her feet. She gasped, making a cute little sound, but after a moment she recovered and her body language suggested that she was allowing me to continue. I scrubbed her hips then worked around her buttocks and her tails, moving upward. "Wait," she said, "Scrub this part." She pointed, and I scrubbed that part, being careful not to get soap or water inside for risk of infection. I moved upward, pausing at her ripe breasts, "Can I wash here?" She nodded, and I continued scrubbing her down, all the way up to her hair, ending with her ears. She made another cute sound when I scrubbed her ears.

She exited the shower and got dressed. This time, she gave me some space with regards to putting on my underwear. Since we were going on an exercise, I put on a sports bra and some panties that wouldn't chafe when I did exercise,and some athletic leggings and a light tee shirt. "No, no, that won't do at all!" she said as she appeared behind me, shaking her head. Her hair had been perfectly combed, and she was wearing an outfit that looked perfect to go clubbing but not even remotely appropriate for what she promised was heavy exercise.

Meanwhile, she seemed to be judging what I wore as not acceptable. "I expect you to be wearing your best for our workout." As I got out of the bathroom, I signaled to Arboria, my former sister. "She's uhhhh apparently expecting me to go out for an exercise in an evening gown," I explained. Arboria was the most level-headed of my friends. Autumntwig was, much like most gnomes, athletic and inclined to the forest, but some of what she said and did was an illusion as I found out over time. Of the girls, she was most unlike her persona as my "brother" Ash.  Aellisa could be brutally honest while at the same time very aloof. Her persona (when not being random people) was as Ash's wife, and unfortunately for them she was spot on, being a permissive but slightly distant mother.  Arboria was honest like Aellisa but understood tact and tended to be the kindest of her friends, though she had a hidden geeky side both as her persona and as herself that was refreshing. Her persona was married to Marina's persona, who was a sweet and approachable man. And indeed Marina

in her real form was those things, but she was also somewhat obsessive compulsive and neurotic. All of these families, for obvious reasons, had adopted children. I had only seen these children when I was there, but they were actually only their part-time children through various methods. But in any case, the last two were easiest to talk to.

"Yeah," Arboria grimaced, "she can be a little crazy. I usually just go with it unless it puts one of us in danger." I sighed, "But why would she insist that I wear this during an exercise?" I pointed to the purple satin open-back prom dress. Marina shrugged, "Feel free to ask her." I slipped it on anyway, and put on some stockings and heels. Then I went to find out what this was about.

Before I could ask, she said, "Good, let's see you do make up." Like before, it wasn't the modest amount of makeup that I would likely apply for a workout, but mascara and eyeshadow, lipstick and some light blush. "So ummm, seriously, what is the purpose of all of this?" I asked. She smiled, "Don't you want to look good while exercising?"

Fifty sit-ups later, Rena declared I would need to change because my clothing stunk and fix my makeup. And again after doing the push-ups. And yet again after doing the squats. I was through three entire outfits and we'd wasted several hours between clothing and makeup. It was now 10am. "**What the fuck?!?** Rena, you keep making me get dressed up and then I mess up my clothing," I complained.

"Do you remember your time working in Gargarean? How

they told you to hustle but kept you from running? I want you to move but not sweat. You need to be able to move effortlessly, like you are gliding across the room," she explained, "This is why you are wearing the heels and the formal dress. I need you able to move, regardless of the conditions. If you can do this in a formal outfit, you can do it wearing anything." I got a leash and watched Rena morph out of her own formal outfit and become a gumiho. The change was not like the Hulk, for no clothing was ripped even though she became much larger. Rather it was almost like a second skin formed around the first, somewhat like Attack on Titan or some kind of mecha thing. If she transformed back, her clothing would be intact.

Rena panted at me expectantly, "Go ahead and put that leash on me, Alicia!" It wasn't normal for pets to be telling their owners to leash them up, but she wasn't my pet, and I was hers rather than the other way around. And so I fastened it around her neck then snapped the harness together around her shoulders and connected to her chest. And then she took off.

While dogs mostly walk in a straight line except for the occasional random distraction, mostly obeying where their masters pulled, foxes gave zero fucks about the person holding the leash, as they run where they want as they own the leash, not the person at the other end. It was more like, "Leash? What leash?"

"Remember," she said while pulling at me enough that I

was threatening to either run or be pulled to the ground, "I want you to learn how to move even at this pace without sweating. Effortless motion." This was hard, but instead of trying to push my body, somehow I just moved along with my own body's momentum. I finally understood how to move with my own flow.

The others had by now gone to their respective families with the help of Arboria's powers. They typically slept in their own beds (those of them that slept), but they kept a mostly normal daylight schedule, skipping out occasionally to help out Rena. Now that I wasn't being spied on full-time, more of their day was freed up for family, but they had a full twenty-fours of schedule, thanks to night activities and putting their kids to bed early.

And so, as I walked Rena, there was a sense for us of complete timelessness. I had no schedule to keep, no parents growing old (since the people I had lived with before loved me but were responsible for adopting me), no job, and no mortgage. It was just me and my fox. As nobody knew that this place was anything other than an abandoned farmhouse and surrounding forest, there was not even any rent to worry about. And so for hours, we walked about while Rena sniffed about, marked her territory, and played with me. I was now definitely getting the feel of having my body carry me with the flow rather than pushing my body. My makeup had not run, true to her seemingly insane expectation. Now were my legs sore despite this walking, nor any of my clothing. And

this was after I had not only a dress, but also stockings and heels. The stockings should have developed a run by now, or the heels should have broken or torn from all of this moment, as Rena continued to move at pretty decent pace.

RENA

Alicia was keeping pace despite the fact that I was trying my best to make her quit so I could get another look at her naked body as I forced her to change yet again. But she took to my lesson despite all of my attempts to exhaust her, and after hours of running about, I finally stopped.

As any book on red foxes would tell you, red foxes aren't pack animals and tend to be solitary hunters, until they mate and from that point on, live in small family groups. They can wander from area to area establishing a home wherever they want to, or can settle and live in a specific area, which they mark with urine in order to establish their territorial boundaries. I had not decided Alicia was to my mate, largely because things were complicated with her gender identity, but I was in heat, and Alicia made me... well, hot.

"Hey Alicia," I said to her, turning my body despite the leash, "Why not unhook the leash, I want you to feel what it's like to ride on my back." Actually, the idea of her groin on my back, and hands holding tightly to my body made me aroused. But I didn't say anything.

ALICIA

I got on Rena, shoving her leash inside a small bag that I had sashed around my waist. I spread my legs on either side

of her back, leggings rubbing against her soft fur, arms and chest near her upper back as I held on tightly. It was exhilarating, though I was too busy looking down as I held tight. Her fur tickled my face, and I gave a cute sneeze. After a short while of running, she slowed down. Could she finally have tired out?

Rena bid me get off for a second. She said, "It's good that you've managed to stay on, but you're not really getting the true experience if you're hanging on for dear life. Let's have you ride side-saddle, as it's more ladylike. And while we're at it, consider this training. You will need to focus on balance and poise, as you try to stay on my back." Was it just me, or did she seem flustered?

She guided me through the proper posture, and I faced forward with my legs leaning to the side. My back was more straight, and this time I was able to look ahead at the trees around me as she lunged ahead. Unlike a horse, gradually working up to a gallop, Rena really had no chill. I was nearly thrown off the very first second, but as my legs were near the left side of her chest, I grabbed her on the right side behind me with my right hand just behind her shoulder and managed to keep myself from sliding off. She suddenly changed direction, as she saw a small animal in her path. I did my best to stay on while Rena did her best to hunt small prey with me on her. After enough time passed, I got off her as she slowed down, and she morphed back to her foxgirl form. "Okay!" she said, "Change out of that nice outfit and that

makeup, as I'm gonna try to make you sweat!"

RENA

I got Alicia to wear a tight fitting pair of yoga shorts that was designed for compression. These combined with her panties gave her the appearance of camel toe. When she asked why she had to wear this along with a short sports top, I told her that it was to increase her flexibility and make the training easier, though I assured her that sometimes she might be wearing clothing like the gown and nevertheless be expected to perform these same moves (and it totally had nothing to with impure lusts that I could tell were developing in me, though none of this was said aloud). When she asked why this sports outfit was also leopard print, I gave her a convincing answer about the importance of camouflage. Even though this should have have raised skepticism, but Alicia was a bit gullible when it came to my directions.

ALICIA

Actually, I wasn't sure I bought her explanation. I just didn't care. Obviously, she must like me, or she wouldn't have dressed me up in all these outfits or showered or slept me.

But then she slapped me across the face. Her face looked stern, as she explained that I needed to learn to predict her attacks, and after that she kept up the offensive, using grapples and strikes while I smoothly dodged out of the way. Maybe it was all about the mission, and getting me trained. Maybe all that closeness was just an act. After all, if she was

able to act like friends of mine, or to pretend to be multiple different people, some of them male.

And so, I tried not to focus on the ridiculous notion that she might have fallen for me, while I focused not only on the ability to effortlessly dodge but to predict what came next. She was going to grab with her right hand, so I sidestepped to the left, then she was going to slash at me with her long and probably sharp nails, and after that she was going to throw a a series of open-palm punches (eight in all: one to my head, another to my left breast, one to my stomach, another to my right shoulder, one to my solar plexus, one near my right breast, another near my neck, and a final one near the hips). I managed to move out of the way of all these attacks. The ability to predict seemed to work hand in hand with my effortless motion and fast reflexes, so I reacted as easily as if I had been trained to do so for months instead of just learning these moves today (in fact, we would continue to train here for the next seven months anyway, for reasons that Rena only voiced much later). But right now, the next prediction of what she was going to do so shocked me that I was wide open to it.

RENA

When I slapped Alicia it hurt me way more than it hurt her. Emotionally, I mean. I'm told that beings like me have roughly the effect of a brick wall hitting back unless they held back. And in fact, my blows were very gentle (though it probably didn't seem that way to her), but I had to keep up

the pretense of attacking her. But what she saw as strikes (beyond the first slap) was me wanting to grab her close, to hold her tight, and to kiss her. Impulse took over, and I was shocked to find out that I had kissed her. She looked shocked too, but I was able not let it shake my composure. "This is why you need to expect the unexpected," I explained in a deadpan voice, and with a completely calm face.

ALICIA

Rena insisted that I had enough practice for now dodging attacks, and it was time for me to try to fight. She offered, "So I'm going to teach you *tai chi chuan*, because that move you used with the holy tornado thing looked similar to that. I am going to test your background, and train you in any way needed to fill in gaps. So show me what you got!" Only, the next moment, I was performing the 103-form Yang family tai chi chuan, moving slowly through a complex martial arts dance. She congratulated me, but I was quick to say, "It's not me! I never learned how to do this."

Her eyebrows raised, "So then, let's assume now that you are able to learn these forms in advance. A precognitive learning, if you will. This means that however long it takes, in the near future, I will have taught you everything I know about tai chi chuan. But more importantly, it may be that you now know the powers of the Oracle too. Show me what you got!" I moved through the Ward Off movement as she tested out a small ball of fire against me. The flames reversed in momentum knocking flames right back at her. She caught the

flames and crushed them in her hand, showing a twing or irritation. "That's a good defense,"she said, "but now it's time to attack me!" She used a series of flames this time against me, and I used Carry Tiger Over Mountain, blocking the flames with water and using a mix of the elements against her.

Each of these abilities would later be passed on to an Oracle, who would each teach the Oracle of Tao various abilities, giving her master over Light, Protection, Elements, Time, Death, Darkness, Justice, and Barriers. This particular one would later be called Four Gods form, but that wasn't relevant because I didn't learn it from an Oracle. Rena was teaching me all these moves.

Rena next used her own time mastery to give herself the appearance of super-speed. But even though I was unable to even see her move as she rapidly moved forward, somehow I still sidestepped out of the way. Rena rushed past, and was about to change direction and attack again, but that slight pause gave me all the time I needed. I used Parting Wild Horse's Mane to freeze her in place.

A grey film surrounded her as time particles slowly broke down. I had just enough time to use Fan Through the Back, a death effect. But even though I was not sure I could trust Rena after all she had done to me, I found it more than a bit absurd to contemplate causing her death. The time freeze wore off before I could decide what to do next. "Tsk tsk," she said, "You have no killer instinct. How will you fare against

Belial?" I instead used a variation of this death effect, Needle At Bottom Of Sea. She collapsed in a heap. But don't worry, this effect was only for subduing creatures by removing their energy to fight. While she was prone and cursing me for her sluggishness, I said, "Killer instinct? I'll show you killer instinct!" I used the tai chi chuan stance known as Cloud Hands to use the power of Justice against her. She was struggling, so I used all of this time to complete the move. My hands began to glow with a strange energy. I rushed in and gave her a beat down, but she just giggled. "Uhhhh, Alicia," she explained, "when you learned this ability in the future, I probably should have told you that it absorbs and transfers damage. The last time you were hit was when I gave you a slap earlier." These abilities were powerful, but most of them had failed thus far. I wasn't good at using them, I guess. There were only two more to use if I wanted to defeat her. I used Snake Creeps Through Grass, summoning darkness and Hellfire against her. Without effort, she used her Foxfire to cleanse this energy, and then her tails swirled about as she used Telekinesis to toss a rock at me. The last technique that I had was able to either solidify my body or make it incorporeal so I just solidified my body to the point where the rocks shattered, and then turned all ghost-like and grabbed her heart through her breasts, much like Vision's move in Marvel comics. She looked pretty woozy as her blood flow was cut down, but then she slapped me again, "Hey you perv, don't touch me there!" She knocked me out of her body, and across the forest a good

ways. I guess she was going easy on me earlier?

I regained consciousness an hour later, watching Rena lean over me with a concerned look on her face. She seemed to be in the middle of healing me. "Congratulations!" she said, "You just won the battle against me." Funny, but shouldn't she be the one lying on the ground if that was that case? "I have nothing left to teach you, as you have mastered all your abilities," she assured me, "but you'll probably have to stay with me and learn them, because you learned them in the future, and that hasn't happened yet. Also, I have other training I want to do with you." I wondered what sort of training she meant.

## Interlude

### ALICIA

She wore a silky translucent sleeved black dress over an opaque sleeveless black dress, she wore a tan fur-trimmed jacket over that, she had freshly shaved legs with no stockings, and she wore some leopard print heels. Her hair was a sort of copper blond and she was sitting near a child and another woman, but I was sure it was Rena because she had made me wear a similar animal print sports outfit. At least, I figured it was her. At church, she said her name was Sally.

I had often attended church before I had met Rena as Fox, and I had never really lapsed as a Christian. Meanwhile, Rena in her many forms ranged in religious preference from devout Christian or Jew, to agnostic, to outright atheist. So

when Sunday came around, she said that she *might* come to church, but she wasn't sure right now. But I knew that she would shapeshift if she was coming there, as foxgirls weren't a visible fixture in churches and temples. I suspected they'd say something about bestiality or something. So I estimated that if she did come, it would be someone that I couldn't recognize. In any case, it was a personal challenge to me to see if I could identify her.

I looked around at the church, an old brick and plaster building with the flooring for pews made from wood while the aisles were made from gray stone. Most of the women were older, along with a few men in the place. I paid no attention to those, focusing on two women who were younger. One was well behind me, so I couldn't get a good look at her, while the other was the one in front of me that fascinated my attention.

The priest was an older man with a beard who reminded me of my father. The lessons for today were the Ten Commandments in Exodus, Romans 3 where they talked about the purpose of the law, and in Luke where John asks if Jesus is the one "or should we seek another?"

But I didn't pay attention, so fixated was I with who I thought was Rena. So I mostly missed the sermon, where the priest was talking something about disillusionment and the results of unfaithful behavior. After church, I left and went home. Yes, Rena had been there, but she insisted that she had been the priest the whole time, and how dare I ignore her and

look at some other woman! "You owe me some serious makeup sex," she insisted. She gave me an angry look that was no fooling, so I obliged. Honestly, this would have been a lot easier if I knew where Rena actually kept her clothing. Then I would be able to tell who wasn't her by how they dressed.

Speaking of clothing, for this church I had dressed as Emett because they didn't know me there, but she insisted I get dressed as Alicia again now that I had my little fun, as she put it. "It's that you're a man that you're thinking of fooling around!" she insisted, "A real woman would be faithful to me, and not go after other women." I of course drew the parallel with the sermon that she gave, connecting worshiping other gods than God to adultery. Yes, she had definitely been the priest.

I put on my makeup, and Rena found me a dress very similar to the outfit that Sally had worn. Rena must have special ordered it just to humiliate me with. I was not surprised at her ability to requisition materials or ask favors. If Rena wanted me to wear Sally's dress, then by God I was gonna wear it. I slipped on the bra and panties, the tight black dress, the silky overdress, and the heels. She spanked my bottom, "You've been a bad girl!" She pulled off my panties, exposing my dick that poked out happily after being freed from being tucked in its confines. "See? Here I thought you were a real woman, but there's this dick right here. This thing right here," she said as she grabbed it, "this dick made

you unfaithful." She ranted a bit about how women never cheated, it was only men. "Now was does your dick have to say for himself?!?" she asked. I shrugged. "It needs to prove how sorry it is," she insisted, pushing me down on the bed. She peeled off some jeans and a blouse, revealing that she had nothing on underneath. She lifted one leg over the left side of me, and she pushed my manhood inside of her. I didn't much care for my junk, but I didn't exactly need to get rid of it either.

As she rocked back and forth, it struck me as strange that she should be angry but this was very gentle sex. It suddenly felt less like some sort of revenge or humiliation now, and more like the sort of playful teasing I had come to expect from Rena. Knowing what her strength was, I got the distinct impression that she wasn't as mad as she acted, and gave in to her. I kissed her on the mouth, and after a moment of surprise, she dropped any further pretense of anger. She kissed me back as she continued to ride with me inside her.

Before I came inside her though, she pulled out and began sucking my plump ripe eggplant. I was about to come inside of her mouth instead of her garden, when she squeezed my testicles firmly. "Hold it!" she said, "was your bad penis trying something again? I'll have to punish it some more." She nibbled on my cock gently with her sharp canines. Personally, I didn't care whether she bit it off, but a blew a large load inside her as soon as she released my balls. She gagged a little, then swallowed it and said, "Ohhhh, now

you're in for it!" As punishment, I apparently deserved to be tickled. And just like that, the tension broke, and we went from straight up femdom to playful teasing. We explored each other's bodies (more than we had touching in the shower, I mean), and generally fumbled through the action of having sex. Rena, despite centuries upon centuries of life, never really experimented with having sex, so I explored about, having the added bonus of her being a shapeshifting foxgirl. I think you can imagine some of these. Now there are also many other things that Rena and I did together in bed. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

JESUS

I have a small confession. I was the priest, not Rena. She was completely playing Alicia because she was horny and needed an excuse to get action. While yes, I possibly would like people to be religious, seeing two people in love was also God's plan. In any case, from that time onward, Alicia tried to focus more in church and listen more to the sermon. Although she was not averse to sex with Rena, I suppose this was good for the church. It was always good to have people involved in church, anyway. There was that time that these con artists tried to convince a devout Catholic to give up his money, and kept switching a magnolia tree that the priest had blessed. The good press had a net gain of greater church attendance, and helped the mission stay open.

# Chapter 17: Nightmare

## ALICIA

One evening, we sat outside Rena's place and talked. Autumntwig, Marina, Aellisa, and Arboria were there, having finished their duties for the day, and we were just hanging out watching the stars. "Hey," I said, "Will I ever see my parents again? I mean, I left everything to be here, but aren't they worried about me?" Arboria shook her head, "I thought you knew. You were adopted." I nodded, "Right, Rena saved me from a killer nurse, and gave them to this family to raise." She shook her head, then Rena clarified, "No this wasn't a regular adoption. They were part of our organization. When you left for my house, their job was over. They never had any real connection to you, any more than 'Willow' or 'Ash' over there." She pointed to Autumntwig and Arboria. Autumntwig shook her head, "Oh I dunno, I'm not convinced that they don't have some lingering feelings. I played your brother all this time, and even though most of it was an outright illusion, I still feel like a brother to you." I looked at Autumntwig's short feminine figure, soft cinnamon hair, and goofy clothing. It was difficult to believe that looking at her now, but she seemed serious about that, so I shrugged. She continued, "I will probably raise these kids that I adopted until they are adults, and maybe after. It's difficult to know whether they have no feelings for you, even if they do pack up and leave when you're gone." Aellisa snorted at this idea. Gnomes among their own families kept in touch with their children for hundreds of years. Elves, on the other hand,

considered their children independent when they were still teenagers.

"What about you two?" I asked, pointing to Arboria and Marina. Marina explained, "Well, merfolk have a sort of mix. Our parents spawn us from eggs, so we never know our actual mother and father. But I used to swim with a school of my kind, so it was a sort of informal family." Arboria said, "In my case, child raising is more about providing a good initial environment. My parents planted my tree in the best soil, watered it, and gave it plenty of fertilizer. There wasn't any social contact to speak of, and I was born when the plant began to fruit. After that, it was pretty much up to me to survive. Once I became independent from a specific tree, I was considered grown."

"What's with all this talk of family anyway? One day, your adopted parents will die," she sulked, "Your actual parents are already dead, long ago from a demon attack. We're here for you, isn't that enough?!?" At this point, I was strongly tempted to scream at her, or at least argue, but one look at her sad face, and all I blurted out was that, "It's not like I ever saw your parents anyway." She sat there sullen, and refused to answer.

RENA

The others don't know about how most immortal beings come about. They were, after all, second or third generation. My parents were human, and when I became immortal, it was years before I met them in Winter, before the witch cursed

the town. I got to watch my mother and father die in front of my eyes, and spent years never able to see them again. The others can all visit their parents whenever they want, but I can't. She's gone. He's gone. And Jesus brought back the dead, but he won't bring them back. They're all in the Afterlife, and I won't be able to see them until I die. I'm hard to kill, and I don't die of old age, so that might be never.

Immortals are made or born, but the first ones all became immortals. It started with human experimentation. Working with genetic manipulation, humans tried to make each other into something resembling monsters. This was what the Great Flood was all about. Not the one that was told about in the Bible, the one that went further back than the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Back then, there was a danger of the entirety of humankind becoming corrupted. God had a plan for humanity, and it was important to destroy these formulas, and to discontinue research. And so flood came and washed most of this crap to the bottom of the sea. But some of us were already around, and made it to safety. Most myths overblow this story, acting like God was kind of monster that flooded the whole world except for Noah's. But there are ark stories around the world. In actuality, only a small number of people died, and they were all scientists too busy to stop tampering with human life.

And so, we who were made were not destroyed, but our genetic engineers were. Most of us were just children, but we sailed to new lands on boats or simply moved inland to

forests, like Aellisa or Arboria. Autumntwig's people moved underground, settling in tunnels near mountains and trees.

With Marina's ancestors, they simply took to the sea, as it was impossible to flood those who breathed water. Their original home was the base of such operations, and you've probably heard of it. Atlantis. The laboratories were destroyed by a freak electrical accident, but most of the city survived beneath the waves. Although, the story they tell themselves is that they used to be psionics, and their headaches smashed up the place. I'm honestly not sure which is true. But the point is, this research was considered taboo, and for a long while, all of us thought of ourselves as damned. Many of us were living among humans, but learned to disguise ourselves in various ways, because humans tended to see things from a perspective that such things were against religion. I studied religions, I meditated, and I tried to understand my powers, powers that my parents didn't have. But nothing made sense, until he came.

Jesus was a bit less like some model of perfection that I tried to teach about, and more like Joy Boy from *One Piece*. He was indeed just a regular human, by all the looks of it. But during a time when there was no faith at all, when science was the only means by which things were built, he showed humanity, elves, and other creatures how to awaken spiritual powers and the thaumaturgy. He taught that the poor, the widowed, the demon-possessed, and the sick were all worthy of grace. That there is no distinction between free

and slave, different races, female or male. What wasn't recopied by me when I went to Israel was his treatment of merfolk, and the various races of genetic hybrids. He saw us as human, and did what he could to teach people that we weren't dumb beasts, nor was our creation against the will of God (though it was halted before all humans became hybrids). This was their Messiah, so I thought they had to listen to him.

Instead they accused him of witchcraft, and told their followers that he was not their chosen one. But unlike in Roman-occupied Israel, they ultimately came around. They saw how God rose our kind from the dead and into everlasting life. That's right, the people who rose from the dead in Matthew had been our people. And unlike in Israel, Jesus rising from the dead and telling them to stop was enough. This Jesus suffered for the purpose of redemption, and his rebirth was something even his adversaries could not ignore. He live not to condemn, but to save all the world, and indeed he did bring worldwide peace. There was also the fact that the equivalent of the Jews at that time had not spent centuries listening to their enemies (effectively corrupting their beliefs), and had not made prophecies to the effect that God would use the Messiah to violently drive away their enemies.

But this is what I got when I tried to recopy the texts in Israel. Inevitably, the scribes had altered it. In my time, no such thing happened because all of it had personally been

witnessed. The world did indeed universally accept teachings of justice and truth, and those people who were violent found they couldn't enter cities and towns anymore. Jesus came to redeem them too, showing them a better way then to hate and destroy. But everything changed when the Fire Nat... I mean, when all the demons attacked. Hybrids like me were forced into hiding. I had the bitter experience of watching my own parents die of age, then watching all the other humans die. What was the big deal?

ALICIA

She was pouting. I didn't know what was bothering her, but I wanted to cheer her up. Lacking any good ideas, I started petting her ears and her many tails. She did seem to calm down, but then she kissed me and held me close. "Dammit," she mutter wistfully, "All this is Belial's fault. Why? Why has he done this to humans? Didn't they have enough to deal with?!?" I supposed she was worried about Winter again, but it seemed deeper than that. I tried to reassure her, knowing it might not do any good, "Don't worry about me. I'm not that hung up on my parent's getting old. My real parents died and that's okay." She started crying again. Damn it. I was at a loss, but then Aellisa offered a surprisingly sensitive suggestion, "I suppose you might feel better in the morning, Renata."

RENA

That was a nice thought. But unfortunately, that night I had a nightmare.

THE DREAM

Alicia was standing in Belial's Castle, facing off against Belial. She was bravely telling Belial that she had been trained by Rena, and was ready to stand against the demon. Instead, Belial showed her how her friend was a huge fraud. How she had been manipulating her all along. Alicia began to doubt, but the scene skipped some information as dreams do, moving forward in time. Alicia was once again resolute, but in the middle of battle something strange happened, and Alicia after, all that struggle, was no more. Rena screamed.

RENA

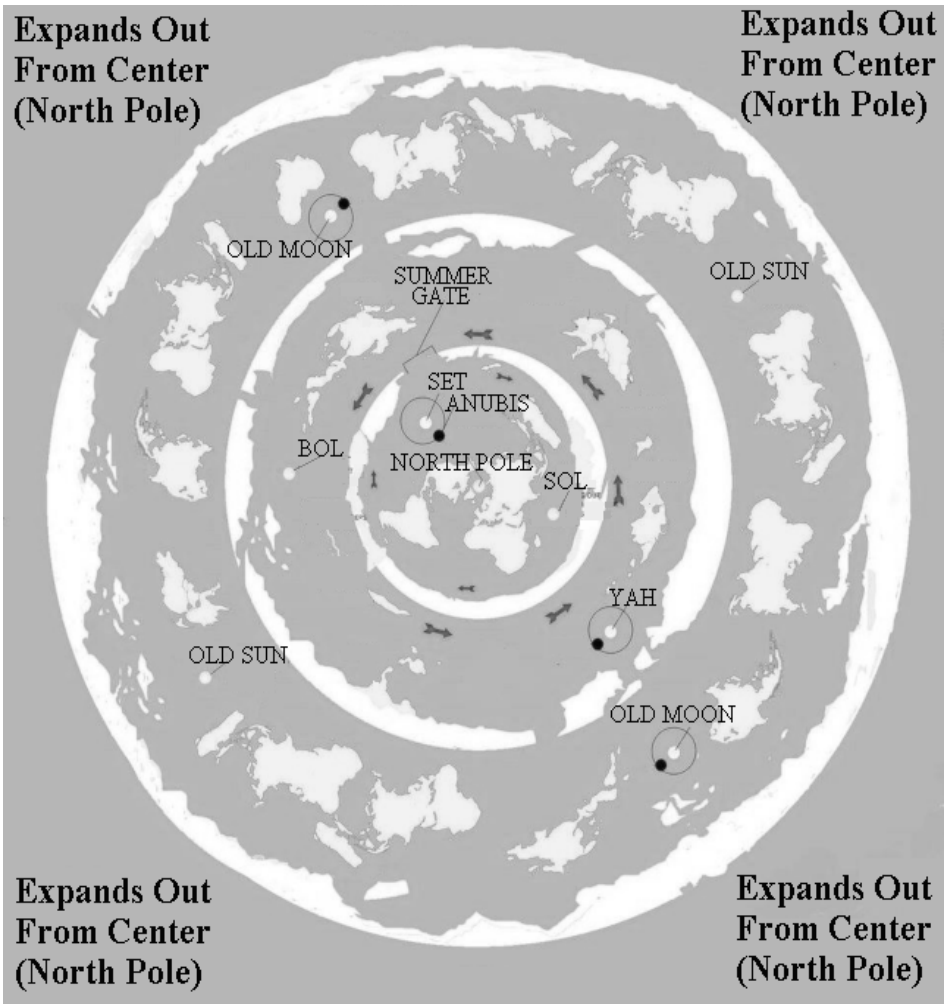
I woke up screaming. Fortunately, this time I wasn't sleeping near enough to Alicia for her to notice. That day, I decided while I would train Alicia (she should be prepared, because I will likely not be able to protect her forever), I wanted to keep her safe. I'd convince her not to go to her death, like all those people who willingly risked their lives opposing that demon, all of those people failed. All of those people who were killed, all because they faced him. I understood what I must do. I must do whatever I could to distract her, calling any of it training, no matter how absurd. Years later, the girl named Ambrosia would use my very tactic to protect her own loved one. She had probably read about the First Oracle. In any case, I wouldn't let him take my dearest. Belial had a lot to answer for.

# Chapter 18: Villain

BELIAL

You humans love to blame me. After all, I'm a demon. I have giant horns, a long snakelike body, large teeth, and thick armor capable of stopping a small jet plane plowing at me at full speed. But I tell you, it is all your fault. You humans, with your prayers for dinner, prayers for good fortune, prayers for marriage, prayers even for politicians that you don't like.

In the beginning, there were God and the Reapers. Then God made the Nephilim, and we were sure that we were the favorite creation. We had long life, power even to move the stars at a whim. Then God made this world, an infinite plane that gradually expands out. Back then, there was only the Ancient Earth, a connected land known as Pangaea, wrapped around a North Pole. Then it expanded from the center, the North Pole becoming a new Southern Rim for the second layer. I destroyed all humans, and tried to destroy the hybrids of this first world. I had a generation of beings that did not know Jesus and did not know of the other religions, so young were they to the new layer, that they were easy prey. But that damned accursed fox survived, thwarting my third plan to subvert humanity.




"But why?" you humans ask. Why would I empty the Ancient Earth of all life? Why would I work again on the Middle Earth, tempting them with a Ring of Power until all were corrupted. Oh yes, I imagine you thought Tolkien's writings were a fairy tale. But unlike his rosy story, the hobbits, elves, dwarves, and humans all succumbed to their darkest desires.

Why? Why indeed. In the beginning, we admired humanity, except for a few angels who were quickly banished from God's sight. It would not do to question God's creation after all. Satan (or as he was known then, Lucifer) had warned us, that it would not do to associate closely with humanity, for they were not like us. Nevertheless, I was fascinated with humans and their sexy bodies... I mean, their free will and their sharp minds capable of any sort of thought, not only that thought which we had known before (in service of God alone). And since humans liked to mate with anything, beings with ten horns, forty eyes, or eyes and hands where there normally weren't would only further appeal to them. The result were humans born with the power and ambition of the Nephilim, but the mortality and free will of humanity. These beings quickly set to work on science, particularly the construction of laboratories to make new life forms. The primary reason for such labs was simple, they wanted to become a creation of their own rather than of God. Secondary, but no less important was the depraved human desire to mate.

God simply destroyed these beings by flood, yet saved some of their creations. But to us, the penalty wasn't so wonderful. The Nephilim who turned away from God and did this (and those who rejected humans earlier) became Fallen, the greater demons. And every new Nephilim became split into one angel and one demon for balance. I looked at the sorry state that my kin had been reduced to, all because of humans. Meanwhile, they continued to pray their loud

prayers, spiritual energy that now burned our skin and reminded us of what we had lost.

And so, pretending to be an angel of light, I introduced mankind to technology and science. I showed them how to understand the world so that they could control it. I also introduced them to the idea that religion ought not to be mixed, when I allowed religion at all. Each religion began to compete for the right to be considered the right religion, with all others being wrong. And so, religious wars started. But I discovered that influence of religion had an overall positive effect on world peace, all except the religion that I helped establish. And so, I spread a lie that religion was the cause of most of the violence in the world, when in fact, people were capable of evil just on the basis of land, oil, or gold. Or pretty gems.

I subverted both the Ancient Earth and the Middle Earth, and now was the third age. I was sure of victory, fox or no fox. One day, God would realize that humans were a poor fit for this world, that they were a virus or parasite, and that the climate needed to change to suit us. The Nephilim would once again be as God planned for them, and these humans would either cease to exist or serve us as lesser creatures. It didn't help that humans mistreated me when I visited towns. I would snuff the hope that these humans had and make the world descend into darkness.

GOD

You humans love to blame me, too. Ah well. Before I

formed Belial in the primal essence I knew him, before he was created I set him apart; I intended him as a demon to darken the nations. This may seem strange that I would deliberately create a demon through sketchy actions, but humanity needs an evil to blame. Truth be told, they blamed Satan, who had actually never become Fallen, who was dutifully accusing humans, demons, and even me. Who I appointed over the lands of the demons to punish them with their own wickedness. As for Belial, I ordained it so that few people would ever have heard of him, even as he destroyed the Ancient Earth and Middle Earth. You may ask, "Why?" I had appointed Jesus even as far back as the Ancient Earth. Why had he not come to save all humanity? Why was this world destroyed not once, but twice?

All of this is based on an assumption. Human beings assume that I gave Jesus to save them from misfortune in this life. But the true purpose of his life, death, and resurrection was to merge with humanity. Just as humans, he lived and he died, and the humans in turn would be born again like him. They would receive an Afterlife, and they would be able to reincarnate if they desired. Death was now only an illusion where for a brief time, all suffering came from the idea that those who were not worthy (which included all humanity) would die, and everything they made would be snuffed out. Yes see, if there is an Afterlife, and not one only for people who are "good enough" but for merfolk, dryads, angels, demons, and even the worst sorts of people, then nothing that happens to this world matters.

John Forbes Nash Jr came up with game theory, known as Nash Equilibrium. The theory goes that a mixed result will exist for any zero-sum game with a finite set of actions. For example, if five men compete for the same woman, none of them will get the girl. None of them will also get the other girls, because they are now second choice. A zero-sum game ultimately arrives at the happiness of absolutely nobody. The guys don't get the girl, the girls don't get a date, and for the time being, none of them got what they wanted. Similarly, in the end of World War I, Germany was handed all of the blame and all of the war debt. This in turn resulted in World War II, and the massacre of millions of Jews.

Belial seemed to win twice, but in actuality, I had designed demons as sadists. Their real wish was to have a land where they could punish each other, and where any human visitors would find that their powers of prayer were greatly reduced. But they were not ready for this, so I showed Belial and the other demons the cost of total victory. They would try again and again, but the time was growing short for the ages of total destruction. Next time, I would act.

BELIAL

It was time to make a new plan. This time, I would come up with an idea to extinguish the light of humanity forever. If this world expanded outward, nullifying everything that I did, then I had no choice but to darken the core itself. It would make the Earth a land of eternal Void. In this way, no new life would be created, because everything born would start to

disappear. A Realm of Void, I called it. I would thwart God's plans this time. Soon all would fall into darkness. I wish I knew what Rena had planned as well. I would not allow her to tamper with my ambitions.

## Chapter 19: Serious Business

### RENA

I was currently about to take a nap, having given Alicia her regular training, but her current "training" was to do everyone's nails. "Focus!" I said, stifling a yawn, "I expect perfect accuracy. If your Oracle powers don't hit Belial, there's no point in this training."

Alicia asked, "So why am I choosing the colors for each of you?" Autumntwig explained, eager for a free manicure, "All of us have different preferences in taste and different personalities. For that matter, different colors go with different hair, skin, and eyes." She pointed to the nails I had already done, coating Autumntwig's with a bunch of cute animals as well as two nails in a plaid pattern. Marina had been sea green, while Arboria had alternating nails of blue and brown. Aellisa had elected to have clear nail polish, except for runes in the center of each nail. I suppose it was her ambition to have each of these enchanted, but none of us could do this. Autumntwig continued, "The Oracle of Tao must figure out the strengths and weaknesses of those they choose to fight."

Alicia pointed to my nails, "Then what about her?" I had already changed my nails no less than four times. I gave her

my best half-truth, "Some creatures have the ability to change their weaknesses." This was true, but the reason was to waste time, and keep her feeling like she needed to train more. This way she would spend more time with me. As Alicia painted on my nails, a yawn crept in, and before I knew it, I had passed out. Alicia had done an entire nail set when I awoke. It was just a plain color of pink, but I was satisfied, as she had also done my feet. "Good, good!" I said, "you can often deal with creatures that change their weaknesses by attacking with a nonelemental attack."

After this, we trained at a hot tub. The others explained that Belial's Castle might have extremes in temperature, so it was important to get used to fierce temperatures. I asked them about cold temperatures, but they explained that they didn't have a Yuki-Onna handy. In any case, the hot tub felt comfortable, not extreme, and the five girls looked extremely relaxed rather than in pain. As for me, I was required to tuck my privates in a swimsuit and wear breast forms, so it was a bit of an adjustment, but overall nowhere near anything I would consider extreme.

I thought for a moment that maybe Rena and her friends might be trying to trick me, but no, that was impossible. It's not like foxes were known for being tricksters or anything. In any case, the fact remained that I wasn't gonna complain about being in a hot tub. And I was still getting martial arts training and plenty of exercise, so it was probably okay.

Every now and then, when I seemed particularly interested

in completing my training or even when there Rena was just sitting off by herself, I noticed a sad look on her face. When I asked what was bothering her, she said, "I'm fine!" and she changed the subject. I caught her crying a few times, but as soon as she noticed me, her face rapidly shifted to perky and upbeat.

More importantly, I noticed a lot less intrusion of space. It was almost as though she was apologizing for her earlier behavior. She was so focused on making me happy that it didn't seem to matter to her how much she seemed to be suffering. I wish that I knew what I could do to cheer her up.

BELIAL

I had proceeded with my plan to corrupt this Earth. I had planted Statues of Darkness throughout the southern rim of the current Earth, near Earth's "South Pole" and I had signed several treaties with the leaders of each country in order to establish the Antarctic Treaty System. So that no pesky visitors might disrupt my plans, a permit was now required to visit the region, citing environmental concerns. This was considered an example of "common heritage of mankind" principle, ignoring the fact that a demon had enacted all of these rules.

I could probably visited the outer layers of Earth and planted my Statues with impunity, for they were uninhabited, but I decided there was no point. I planted my own Castle on the North Pole, as a sort of satellite tower to pick up and transmit darkness throughout the Earth.

But there was always a chance that Rena and her followers might stop me. I needed a useful idiot. Someone with drive to root out their location, yet no idea of my true plans. Someone like...

JAVERT

Chastity Javert here. I'm Ace Reporter for the local paper. Only, it was a slow news week. Actually, if we're being perfectly honest, it was a slow news year. While national news covered Biden's attempts to force the public to buy electric vehicles (as though they could afford them, speaking as one who still owns the same beat-up Chevy from ten years ago) and international news talking about panic-buying and shortages in China as COVID restrictions are eased, our local news had the occasional lost puppy or someone getting a speeding ticket.

I needed some hard-hitting news, and I needed it yesterday. And so, when a creepy looking man with a black hoodie came to my office and gave me a hot tip, I paid no attention to the apparent necrosis all over his face and arms, his glowing red eyes, or the fact that the room got visibly darker after he entered. Hey, a tip was a tip! The man introduced himself as B. Lyle and told me the following, "A man named Emett Smith apparently has not been seen in over six months. No missing persons report was filed, and no death certificate has been reported. I would have asked his parents, but they also seem to be missing. So there are three missing persons and none of this was covered." Had things been less slow, I

might have dismissed this as an unsolved mystery, but things were how they were so it was time to be a good investigative reporter.

I started with the location of the house. Upon visiting it, it was as though the entire building had simply uprooted. Bare ground sat where once there had been a house with an attic and a basement, and behind that, a deck with what appeared to be a pool had also been pulled out. It was as though Emett's parents moved their entire place to some new address. Hmmm, this was a bit stranger than a typical vanishing. I checked Emett's criminal records, and for my trouble I found nothing but a few traffic tickets. A missing person report had apparently been filed, but it was dated 2011. I hit the streets asking random people in town about this Emett. Many of them had never actually met him. I asked local churches, showing the picture of him. "You know," a parishioner of one church said, "that looks an awful lot like Alicia. Though she only visited occasionally, and the last time was well over six months ago." I took down Alicia's full name, and cross-referenced it with this address. Apparently someone had been living at this address for a few years by that name. But further investigation turned up no birth certificate, no college degree, and a paper trail which seemed to turn up in a dead end. On a whim, I remembered how the church had said Emett looked like Alicia, and used the Freedom of Information Act to dig up some copies of driver's licenses. I quickly realized that Emett and Alicia were probably the same person, and my suspicions were

confirmed when I found a legal paper requesting a change of name and gender. I further searched Alicia's work records, and saw an application mentioning an emergency contact not of Alicia's own parents but of someone named Katherine Fox Hillard. My suspicion was that maybe this Alicia had moved from their parents' home to that of a friend, so I decided to research Katherine Hillard.

Katherine Fox Hillard had no legal identity. Strangely, despite this, she has a fairly lengthy work record, though most of these jobs didn't explain this discrepancy. How was she able to be employed without real identification? I went home from the office, and decided to use the internet. Under Katherine Hillard, repeated mention of the pink ranger in *Power Rangers* kept cropping up. I decided this name was a pseudonym, so I asked the internet random combinations of words until I finally connected the name of our town with the word "Fox". As a result, I got local legends of a fox spirit, complete with a map of sightings. Virtually all of these were near a farmhouse off the main road. Having no better leads at this point, I searched down this street, knocking on doors and asking people if they had seen someone matching the description of either Kat Hillard or Emett/Alicia, showing photos of each. Unsurprisingly, none of them had ever seen Kat's face, but on the fifth try, one of them did mention seeing someone who looked like that from the back (maybe) enter a nearby forest near the farmhouse. As I was reluctant to go through a forest that said No Trespassing, I instead headed toward the farm. The land looked as though it had

been abandoned, and nobody including the IRS had messed with it in years. However, I got about halfway towards it when suddenly I slammed hard against something and found myself on the ground. I saw some people rushing towards me. "She looks hurt! Get her some treatment," they said. One of these was surely Alicia.

MARINA

I knew I should have told Autumntwig to make the illusion closer to the actual proportions of our place. As far as I was concerned, things must be perfect or they were no good, but Autumntwig didn't share my concern. We saw her from the side window right as she rather embarrassingly bonked her head on the side wall, nearly knocking herself out on the spot. We shifted to human forms, and then dragged the girl indoors, aware that we were blowing our cover by doing this. But it had been our fault that she had gotten hurt, so the least we could do was pull her inside. But she became alarmed when we entered the inside of a house from apparent empty space. We had tried to look like regular humans, but unfortunately, "Wait a second," she said, "You over there there are Alicia, right? I've been looking for you. And you are their sister Willow. And you look like Ash, but why are you a girl? And you..." She faced Rena, who had changed her form perfectly. "Who are you?" she asked. Everyone was so alarmed at being discovered that they broke cover. Rena reverted to her fox girl form, and grabbed this woman only to bodily toss her outside. After checking that she was medically okay first, of course. Aellisa miniaturized the

house, and we took a tree portal to another location in darkest Africa. She would surely never find us here.

## Chapter 20: Pursued

RENA

She found us within a week. Almost no sooner did we unpack everything before she tracked us down again. Apparently she had her own news helicopter.

JAVERT

"Chastity Javert here. I'm here as an eyewitness to something that I cannot explain. Despite all logic, I encountered what appeared to be one mermaid, one fox girl, an elf, a girl with flowers and twigs in her hair, and a really really short girl. Just one week ago, I encountered them in what appeared to be an abandoned farm structure but saw them disappear into a nearby tree. Thanks to a tip from a certain source who will remain anonymous, I was able to confirm that she can only leave trees of the same species as she left. After help from a horticultural expert, I confirmed that this was a *Chamaecyparis thyoides*, or Atlantic White Cedar. I then rounded up all known locations where these were planted, and found that in 1974, a native of Virginia smuggled in several seeds and planted them, right here, in this spot. I will now interview the people living in this bungalow over here," I said, standing with the chopper open and the camera pointed at the house. I signaled for the camera person to turn off the recorder.

I again didn't get a chance to interview them, as they again

fled through a tree that she had as a sapling. But since the horticulturist had given me a book titled *All Trees of the Entire Known World*, I was quickly able to discover that this tree only grew naturally near the Demilitarized Zone near the Korean borders.

RENA

Oh not again. I was about to snuggle up to Alicia and kiss her when we heard the whir of a helicopter. This time, it had only been a day.

JAVERT

Over the next month, I was able to ceaselessly track this group down before they could use another tree. Even when they did so, I was able to extrapolate from nearby trees odds of which one they would use next and find them anyway.

Midway through the process, my boss told me that they were looking for news stories, not a crusade. "Excuse me sir, but as I own this news chopper outright, I will pursue this story," I told him. He assured me that my job would not be waiting for me when I got back.  I needed this story, even if I had to sell it to the tabloids. So I continued for week after week.

Finally they came out, and screamed at me, "All right! All right! I'll give you your damned interview. That's what you want, right?"

## Chapter 21: Interview

JAVERT

I nodded. I had prepared my interview carefully, but to be honest, I now had a great deal more questions than when I started. I turned on a tape recorder, and bid my camera person start rolling, "Okay, first things first. My initial report was about your mysterious disappearance, and that of your parents."

Alicia (as she assured me was her name now instead of Emett) told backstory that I didn't ask for about her college life, meeting several different women, struggles with depression, and so on. I supposed she was getting somewhere, but it felt like there were a series of threads dangling in midair but I couldn't see the larger fabric yet. She then told of Kat Fox Hillard, and how this Fox seemed to be everywhere. "It was then that I first believed she was a spy," she said. She further elaborated on how a series of coincidences happened, and the entire idea behind her being a spy seemed to lose merit. "But she was still suspicious as hell," she continued, "So I began to suspect that she was a supernatural being."

This logical leap seemed out of nowhere, so I asked for clarification, "Wait, why didn't you just assume she was a normal person?" Alicia explained, "Well, it's like I'd be meeting one person and talk to them, and later on in the week, someone else would seem to have evidence of that conversation." She gave examples, like when she attended a club only for later on in the week, the same imagery to crop up in church. I was still dubious that they weren't just

coincidences, but as she gave example after example, my doubt appeared to fade. I did however begin to develop other doubts, namely serious doubts that any of this was fit to be published even in the National Enquirer. Oh sure, I believed it now. But the idea that supernatural beings were living among us, that one in particular frequently shapeshifted and encountered a person repeatedly was something that modern science was at a loss to explain. The cornerstone of investigative journalism was the idea of using principles of logic and reason to come to a conclusion. How could I write this article in a way where it wouldn't be laughed off?

"Alright, next question," I stopped to change a tape, as all she had explained had filled one up, "What about your parents?" Alicia said, "The last I saw of them, they were at their houses, though honestly, when my memory returned, I discovered that I was adopted. Around that time I found this house and met Rena and her friends, so I don't really know what happened next." I scribbled that particular detail down, "So you weren't aware that there is a gaping bare spot where your parent's house used to be?" She looked surprised, "Wait, what?!? Rena told me that my parents might leave now that I was gone, but an entire house?"

"I suspected that this might happen," Rena said, "But should you want to contact your adopted parents again, I have their cellphone number." She also gave their forwarding address, "Your parents worked for my interests after all, so if you need a father or mother figure to talk to, go right ahead!"

Alicia got sidetracked from the interview for the next several minutes while she had a long conversation with her mom. Her mom, despite not being her real mom, and obviously having moved to some undisclosed location, proceeding to ask her if she was eating enough, how she was managing with living with Rena, whether she was changing her underwear, and other questions similar to what any mom would want to know about. Alicia looked happy.

But my interview wasn't completed so I decided to instead ask the one she called Rena some questions, "So, Rena was it? Introduce yourself and your friends. As in, what exactly are all of you?" Rena explained, pointing around the area, "I'm a gumiho. Marina over here is a mermaid. Autumntwig is a gnome. That's Aellisa, she's an elf. And this is Arboria, she's a dryad." I needed to ask what a dryad and a gumiho were. "So like," she explained, "a gumiho is a fox spirit with nine tails. And a dryad is a forest being. When she was a child, she would get sick if she was too far away from her tree, but now she's fine anywhere. Crowded or polluted cities make her uncomfortable, though." I scribbled notes about each of them, including drawings as they showed their true forms. I guess I figured that we probably wouldn't be able to use the video footage we had.

I paused the recorder for a second to make sure that all the footage was working, "Okay, then my next question was about what everyone is doing here. This seems like a rather remote area, and you didn't mind uprooting repeatedly to try

to avoid me." This question was easy for Rena to answer, so she talked without restraint, "Well, it all started millions of years ago, when the Earth was unified into one continent circling the North Pole known as Pangaea. Our town Winter had just become attacked by a demon named Belial..." I took notice of this, interrupting, "Belial? That's the name of the man who assigned me to report on you guys. Only his name was spelled differently." Rena shook her head, "Make no mistake, that was probably a demon in disguise that you were seeing." I noted that his eyes did look kinda funny. She continued with her story, talking about how Alicia, or Alethea as her name had been at the time, had shown that she had a rare power that they recognized as the power of the Oracle, and that they had sent her into the future in order to protect her. I asked her to spell the name Alethea to make sure I got it right. I wanted to write this news somehow or other, so it was important to be accurate as possible. I made a mental note to take some of the world history stuff off the record, as most people were bored by that, even though there were years and years of history that I knew nothing about.

I asked a follow up question, "So I'm to understand that the purpose of her staying here was something like training to fight Belial? And what would you say the progress of training is?" Rena blurted out, "Well, it's pretty much been done for the last two weeks. That's why it was so easy for us to move. We didn't have any important business left." Alicia had finished her phone call, and her mouth was open wide in shock about something. She beckoned Rena over inside the

house. I still couldn't see where the actual entrance and exit of the building were, so while they disappeared from my sight, I decided to interview the others.

"Ummmm so Marina," I asked, "How exactly do your fins turn into legs? Can you show me?" Marina explained, grabbing some water and a container of salt, "It's like this..."

## Chapter 22: Confession

JAVERT

"...And so, in regular water, my fins turn into feet," she concluded. "I see," I said, writing this down in my notebook. This was not going on the record. Especially since Marina showed her entire lower body changing rather than just her legs.

ALICIA

As much as I suspected I may be adopted, I couldn't really hate my parents. They raised me after all, and it didn't do to hold resentment over your family. Not like those douchebags Harry and Meghan, who tell everyone about how the royal family was so "racist" for not putting up with the crap of a poser who was clearly white and her white kid. So yeah, whether I was born as their child or adopted, I loved my mom and dad no less. But Rena and I, we needed to talk.

"Seriously, you finished training weeks ago?!?" I roared, "Why didn't you tell me?" Rena sighed, as though releasing some great weight from her body. She sighed some more. And then a single tear fell from her eye, Keep America Beautiful commercial style, before many more joined it. She

blubbered, "I wanted to tell you! But I saw you die in my dream! And it was so real! Listen, you don't know what it was like fighting Belial. I tried several times over several million years. We even tried leading some sorcerers to his door using nuclear energy. He shrugged off a 50 Megaton blast like it was nothing! We tried a team of clerics back when such a thing was common. Not even the entire team managed to be strong enough to pierce his skin. I had to keep fleeing just to survive. Are you sure that you can win?"

I patted her shoulder, "Why wouldn't I? I mean, you worked for several months training me. You pushed me hard to learn how to predict things, and how to learn the various *tai chi chuan* movements. And you trained me to move more smoothly in general." She shook her head, "But I only received guidelines from someone else! I don't know how your powers work. You're supposed to visit eight Oracles and receive some profound philosophical lesson or something. Each one teaches you how to truly use each formation. And all of those together is supposed to lead the way to you understanding the final technique, where you can use the Tao itself. But I wasn't able to teach you any of this. I'm a fraud." She sobbed.

I told her, "Renata, you are not a fraud. You are a beautiful and smart woman and I respect you for everything you've done for me." She kept sobbing, "No, I believe you mean that, but I've just been playing spy all this time. We have thousands of members, but many of them left. We were an

amateur organization, good for basic surveillance, but our codebreaking team was usually pretty unsophisticated. We didn't draft any ciphers or puzzles, just simple messages. And we were hopeless at finding out what Belial was planning. I mean, he almost killed you without us knowing about it. I'm disorganized, I'm impulsive, and my sense of personal boundaries is a joke. I've been goofing off this entire time, mostly trying to keep my fascination with your new male body from interfering with training you. You can see how that went from all the showers and sleeping together." She paused, as memories of those times replayed in my head. Rena was still down on herself, and I couldn't just tell her, "Suck it up!" So I gave her some confession of my own, "I'm not transgender." She blinked, "Huh?"

I explained, "Way back when I was Richmond, I felt that people in the LGBT groups were expecting something out of me. As a result of my siblings, I did have a fascination with women's clothing, yes. But the idea that I was dysphoric or that I felt trapped in this body? No, that wasn't a thing. I was into women, and I was perfectly content either presenting as male or female. It just didn't matter to me. At one time, I thought I was trans, because the LGBT group had convinced me. But when I went to have an operation, the doctor told me everything this surgery involved, and it wasn't me. I knew that I just wasn't into cutting off parts of my body that I didn't hate. I didn't like them either, I just didn't have any kind of feeling. I decided being genderfluid was medically cheaper than constant electrolysis, hormones, and surgery. But if you

want the truth, it was because the idea of mangling my body seemed too much like self-hatred. Although I can be quite feminine, I'm also a boy interested in a girl. You. So don't be down on yourself. It hurt me to see you so sad." I gave her a tight hug.

She looked up at me, suddenly extremely vulnerable, and leaned in for a kiss. One quick kiss, turned into another, far more hungry than the last. Rena had years of sadness and waiting, and I had dealt with the feeling of knowing that I was now a male who liked pretty things yet used to be a female. We were outcasts adrift in a world that didn't understand. We didn't just want each other, we were in need of what the other partner could provide. This hunger wasn't satisfied by a simple kiss, but welled up in us like a raging fire.

We undressed each other, barely breaking contact between kisses, except to catch our breath. We kept touching each other while trying to undress, so the foreplay made it that much longer, as I would awkwardly fumble with a zipper or button while she touched and/or kissed my neck, working towards my chest, and nibbled on my ears a bit. I had almost managed to reach her zipper when Rena surprised me by grabbing my buttocks, and rubbing a finger between, causing a small squeal as my prostate was massaged. I lost focus for a second, only to do so again when her hand reached into my panties as started to seized the base of my shaft. It was another thirty minutes before actually undressed, as no

sooner did I calm myself down than I decided to mess with her too. I decided to finger her a bit. I moved my middle and ring finger inside her vulva, randomly exploring for something interesting when my fingers both touched something really sensitive. I rubbed it up and down, before accidentally reaching into a small crevice where an even more sensitive spot existed. Since it was only my second time doing this, I rubbed at it, wondering what I was touching. She was already more than a bit aroused, so this caused her whole body to shake, and she leaned back against the nearby wall. I eased up, but she grabbed my hand, "Who said you could stop?" So I continued until she had a slightly glazed look on her face and seemed to be in the throes of passion.

Rena wore a navy blue empire waist midi dress with some black stiletto heels. She was naturally comfortable in such a dress because of the way it accommodated her tails. I had stripped off her panties in order to do this to her. As for me, I had been wearing a pink and white frilled dress, gartered white stockings, and some matching pink heels. She unbuttoned my dress and slid it to the ground, as I unzipped her in back. She unhooked her bra and stood naked before me, while I slid off my lingerie. Unlike before, where most of the time we were clothed and just messing around with kinks and stuff, this time there was definite sense that we were both completely naked. My breast forms were attached by any adhesive (it was a nuisance to apply), so they slipped off with the brassiere. And so here I was standing with long wavy hair and makeup but from the neck down, my flat chest

and my cock gave me away as a male, even though my legs, face, underarms, and torso were smooth of any stubble. I was looking at a woman with healthy breasts, lean waist, nice hips and ass, and a number of tails wagging in interest. It was time for intimacy.

Yet we didn't rush into anything. I continued the foreplay, remembering that Rena was in need of comforting, despite the growing hunger that throbbed inside me, and desire that stirred inside her loins. I apologize for some cheesy phrases here, but there was a sense of ambivalence, where a part of me wanted to comfort her and tell her that everything was all right, whereas a certain organ wanted to bone her hard and hurry up about it. I suppose it was to my credit that the gentler voice won out, so it was only after making sure that she felt comfortable that we went ahead.

RENA

It was her second time, but she seemed to know what she was doing a little better. Although Alicia was very much all man right now, there was something very meek and gentle about her as she slowly and gently inserted her cute little cock into my canyon. Yes, I am aware the word "inserted" is one of those words like *moist* that produces a jarring effect on the English language. But as it was, I was very moist right then, so fuck you English critics and your aversion to certain words. I can be moist while someone inserts her family organ into me. Alicia's inexperience still showed, as once she was inside me, she didn't really know what to do. So I helped

her out by providing rhythm, and by making sure her cock was touching all the right places. Alicia pulled out after a bit, just in time to come on my breasts. I asked her to clean up after herself, so she licked it up with her tongue, just before sucking on my breasts.

Unlike before, we weren't into experimenting so much, so no upright midair riding, no dangling upside-down, and no uncomfortable positions. And no anal sex. It was a bit more boring as we got on the bed, but my back thanked me, and my ass thanked me that something wasn't driven in back there. But I did enjoy oral sex while she licked me below with her tongue. Come to think of it, wasn't that the same tongue that licked semen off my breasts?

Oh well. Saliva usually killed off sperm anyway. So certain was I that this was safe sex that I rubbed some of the cum in my own mouth inside me, feeling myself up. It was safe because of all the saliva, I told myself.

ALICIA

About a week later, the pregnancy test read «+» in the main part. As safe sex plans went, this was not of the better ideas. But she said she wanted to keep the child. Little did I know that neither of us would be able to see that child.

## Chapter 23: Home Invasion

MARINA

I was still outside talking to Javert, who was fascinated with mermaids, obviously after seeing more than her share of Disney films (nobody had told her that the original version

had her watching another person's wedding while her feet were torturing her). "Look, I'd better go though," she finally said, "I'd like your contact information though. It's just that I have to get back to figure out how to pick up the pieces of my career. The impossibly small pieces." She headed towards the chopper, but she didn't get as far as halfway before a small army of creatures started swarming in on our property. Javert (who assured me that she preferred Chastity to the name that had association with the villain in Les Miserables) flinched and hid behind me as a mix of goblins, wargs, orcs, and lesser demons crawled out of the woodwork.

ARBORIA

I estimated that the makeup was roughly 20% orc, 20% warg (each orc was riding or leading a warg from what I saw), 50% goblin, and only the last 10% were demons. There were a few trolls mixed in with the goblins, but nothing we couldn't handle when Rena got back.

I looked at the units and quickly formed a strategy against them. The toughest customers would be the demons and trolls, as most of out attacks wouldn't work. But due to their small demographic, it was likely we could save them until last. In the mean time, our second threat was the lightning bruiser combination of orc and warg. Goblins were not a small threat either. Sneaky, immune to illusions, and able to undermine opponents through the Rival Power of Doubt, goblins were in some ways the most dangerous of them all. I huddled together with my friends, and we all carried out my

plan.

First, Autumntwig used illusion on the orcs, getting them to fight goblins, other orcs, and even other wargs. This didn't kill all the orcs or anything so successful, but it created a great deal of chaos which we exploited. While this was going on, Aellisa used geomancy. While half-elves can only manage this once daily, Aellisa was able to use this at will, and so she took advantage of standing on the right ground to get the right effect. A large number of vines sprung from the ground, tripping and choking the wargs. I helped out with this, as vines are kinda my thing, and I occasionally used some sleeping pollen on some of the trolls. Aellisa rushed in, and slashed some of these sleeping orcs and wargs, while some of the others continued to attack the goblins and the others. Since the goblins were being attacked, even though no illusion worked on them, they fought their own "allies". The way goblins fought was nothing to sneeze at. They were petty, devious creatures who had a tendency toward ganging up or laying traps. The goblins quickly massacred any orcs and wargs that remained after Aellisa slashed them up, then turned their attention to us. "You there," one of them said to Aellisa, "You can't hold that dagger. You're a pathetic and weak elf." Just like that, Aellisa's hands became too scrawny to even lift it, and it dropped to the ground. If not for Autumntwig shooting her opponent, and Marina attacking a few nearby ones with a trident, she would have been in serious danger. Autumntwig's weapon was a homemade pistol, but gnome technology is known for its tendency

toward cruft. Anything from steampunk gives an inkling of what this means, but more helpful is imagining an "overclocked" pistol. It was designed to fire faster using a crank and pulley system, and every shot had a recoil that potentially injured her. So after saving Aellisa, both had to be dragged off near the house to rest. It was up to me and Marina, and we couldn't afford any more of their Doubt. Thinking quickly, my best plan to keep them from talking was to induce a sneezing fit. Marina, on the other hand, simply created a cylinder of water, and then charged them with her spear. It took roughly half an hour, but the two of us managed to exterminate these goblins. But what remained was impossible to kill.

As everyone knows, trolls are regenerative and demons are practically immune to all damage that isn't blessed or holy. Since none of us had manage to obtain a sufficiently blessed weapon over the centuries, and only Rena ready access to fire, we were having troubles. Marina would stab at a troll only for it to regrow and try to attack her. Autumntwig had recovered enough so she could limp over, and she handed me a few bottles of something. "Trolls are also weak to acid," she reminded. So I carefully handled each bottle, unstopping the cap and tossing the liquid inside at one or the other. It was definitely working. But then we ran out of bottles...

ALICIA

After a pretty satisfying event (I entered her two more times after that), Rena and I noticed some commotion

outside. We slid the door open to see that the group was fighting a mixed group of critters, most of which to their credit were now lying dead. I used the Brush Knee Twist Step to sweep away the demons that were surrounding everyone, and Rena flooded the area with a wave of heat. It wasn't hot enough to cause more than mild burns to them, but this sort of heat was lethal to trolls.

In the aftermath, we caught Javert before she left. "Did Belial ever give you anything?" Aellisa asked her. She looked puzzled, but she fished through a coat pocket and pulled out an envelope. I was having trouble tracking me so he handed this note. The letter read, « Dear Charity Javert, it appears that you are talking about a type of teleportation native to certain supernatural species of forest creatures. Be advised these beings are not to be trusted. You must locate a tree similar to the tree they entered in order to track them. I suggest you find a botany professor something similar. -B. Lyle» But what Aellisa was more interested in was the envelope which read the address «Charity Javert, The Helicopter, Middle of the Atlantic Ocean» on it. Looking closer, runes glowed. "Looks like tracking magic," Aellisa mumbled. "Tracking magic?!?" Javert exclaimed.

## Chapter 24: Decision

### JAVERT

"Tracking magic?!?" I exclaimed, "Explain." Aellisa nodded, "Okay it's like this. Magic is composed of a lot of rules, but all you need to know of as a human is that it mostly

looks like this..." I was seeing a lot of nothing. "I'm seeing a lot of nothing," I admitted.

"Oh right, you're a regular human. Hold on," she poked me with her finger at the base of my skull. "What was that for?!?" I asked. Aellisa explained, "That was a pressure point that I activated so you could see this." I saw the Chinese characters **北**, **南**, **東**, and **西** float in midair. "These are directional runes," she explained, "There are others denoting things like angles, radius, and distance, but the point is that magic works on runes like these. This letter was written so it could be delivered to you. But more importantly, another set of runes here," she pointed to the letter where I now saw the layers of runes on it, "allows it to continue tracking you, even to our doorstep. Hmmmm, I wonder if I can reverse engineer these runes for they will lead us to where Belial is?" I thought through the implications of this only for a second before I realized there had never been any news story. I had been used.

Now many media never understand when they have been controlled by demons, but I certainly did. I wasn't taking it well, "That damned demon will pay!!! Forget going home, you guys can borrow my chopper. I'm gonna do whatever I can to help you hunt this thing down! Oh and ummm also, does the fact that I can see runes mean I can now learn to use magic?" I imagined myself saying "*Expecto Patronus*." They shrugged, "Maybe?"

# Chapter 25: Darkness

## RENA

Aellisa was fiddling around with that letter, trying to reprogram it. It was slow to be done, however, as it had been more than a few days of writing out formulas, and something seemed to be draining her concentration. And then suddenly, I felt it too.

As an immortal, I had been centuries without so much as a common cold, but now I felt very stuffy. It was as though I had been in a hot dry room for weeks, and now I felt dehydrated and with a several headache. I had the equivalent of a migraine, only instead of light streaming in my eyes, there was persistent darkness. Not only that, there was nausea, fatigue, loss of focus, and extreme muscle weakness. "What's wrong?" Alicia asked me. I explained all of this, in addition to the fact that we supernatural beings couldn't get sick in the first place. "Okay," she said, "I want you to try to meditate. You need to focus, and try to figure out the source of this problem.

It took some time to do this, because I was fighting my own body and its sickness. But I shut out worry about my own body, and simply concentrated on my breathing. One breath of air, in. One breath of air, out. Another breath of air, in. Another breath of air, out. And so on, gradually my breath got slower, and my mind relaxed and focused. I traced the sickness outside my own body to a reddish black cloud. I traced the cloud outward from there, as it extended from our

current location in Dark Hedges, Northern Ireland. It was heading north toward the North Pole from the looks of it, but I traced it from its source using pure concentration. It traveled south from Northern Ireland to Ireland proper, then to Spain and Portugal, through several countries in Africa, over a vast stretch of ocean, and then turning slightly left when water became ice. I started to nod off, and entered a deep sleep, yet my vision never broke. I saw the darkness gather around a Statue of Darkness. I stared at it, and suddenly I saw more of them, one by one, until I had measured five in a star circling this southern rim of the current Earth. This imagery reminded me of watching *Sailor Moon* with Alicia, where Crystal Points were infected with darkness so that in the future, Crystal Tokyo would be corrupted. The nightmarish way that these images played out caused me to scream and writhe like I was being electrocuted. Where before I was simply feeling worn out, right now I had a sort of dark sludge in my system, and I was violently ill. I was bleeding from my eyes, and had sudden fits of projectile vomit, defecation, and crawling backwards on the ceiling. I was possessed after all. The effect suddenly broke from my body. I couldn't feel the darkness anymore. More importantly, I couldn't feel the influence of the statues anymore.

ALICIA

I watched Rena struggle through, and I felt sad for her. I couldn't let Rena die! I had to do something. I used the Brush Knee Twist Step to sweep away the corruption that

was sucking into her and making her bleed and vomit. The tornado of light was an excellent tool of exorcism, and the sickness was dispersed from her body.

Rena had revealed to me that what she actually wanted was to stay by my side. I had learned that day that I had a choice, as I could simply let Belial be to live out his life. Or at least, I thought I did. Now it was looking like Belial had seen us as a threat, regardless of any action we took against him.

And so, I made up my mind that we must definitely try to stop him. Javert was going anyway, as she was pissed, and would follow him to the ends of the Earth regardless of her inability to stop him. But I had thought maybe it would be okay to sit this one out. If Rena was dying, he had forced my hand.

## Chapter 26: Results

BELIAL

This cannot be!!! Someone had destroyed all of my statues. How had they known about me plans? I resorted to scrying with a crystal ball to determine what had happened.

The image swirled into place, as the clouds of ether parted, allowing me to see events in the past and the future. In the future, I saw the Oracle of Tao. I was curious about that so I focused, and saw the Oracle lose. Nevermind then. I paid no attention to a further prediction concerning a large earthenware urn, instead focusing all my attention on what happened in the past. Let's see here... Apparently that fox Rena got sick from the fumes of my darkness. Then it looks

like she tried to trace the darkness back to its source. Then she got possessed, only for the Oracle to break the Statues by accident when the possession was disentangled.

A pity. Having her spirit darkened, and making her a demoniac would have been a a suitable outcome. Oh well. Within the month, I will visit the arctic zones again, and possibly even plant more along the outer rims of the Middle Earth and Ancient Earth. This was merely a setback. I would have time to make things go my way...

***Soon***.

AELLISA

I analyzed this set of runes for days, hoping to figure out how it worked. But I had hit an impasse. I should have figured it out by then, but instead, I became chronically distracted by fatigue and general malaise. The others besides Alicia and Javert also seemed sick, so I suspected our sickness had a great deal to do with our immortality and spiritual ability. But for some reason, Rena caught a particularly bad case of it. As for me, I was forced to rest in my bed for most of the time, with a small plastic wastebasket nearby in case I vomited. Yet despite the gross feeling in my system, my body was congested and I couldn't manage to get anything out. It was like a dry flu or something. I had dizziness and fatigue, and the constant feeling of dehydration, but without a feeling that my body was willing or able to get rid of the sickness. Chills ripped through my body, and I was unable to get anything productive done. I

immediately suspected that this sickness was from Belial, as if the fact that we immortals don't become sick wasn't a big enough hint.

Then as suddenly as it had come, my illness washed away. I could get up and run around, as well as I had days before the sickness came. More importantly, I could concentrate, so I set to work decoding the demonic runes into a readable language. This was the key part of this. Magic can be reprogrammed or dispelled, but only if you understand the language of the effect. I set to work decoding that the Dark Tongue was not Orcish or Goblin language, but indeed Demonic. Matching the spoken language with the written language meant that I could in turn figure out grammar and meaning, in much the same way as someone determining that Chinese-looking characters were Japanese kanji instead of actual Chinese. I knew that Angelic and Demonic were the same spoken language but a different text, so from there I was able to analyze grammar from an old passage in the Symbolic alphabet of Angelic. Finally, I was able to grasp the meaning of the characters, and to write «Trace this letter back to Belial» in Demonic.

"Eureka! I've done it!" I said in Demonic, forgetting myself in extreme nerdiness. Then I realized that those around me not only couldn't understand me, but because of the deep tone of Demonic, were somewhat frightened. "...Are you okay?" Arboria asked. I tried again, "'Eureka! I've done it,' I said. We now have a means to track Belial." Alicia said, "That's

great! How does it work." Only for me to say, "Ummmm...." I had just realized that Belial's means of tracking involved actual demonic magic, which I didn't have.

And so, Autumntwig and I worked together crafting a device that looked based on a polygraph machine and a record player. I inserted a Gleason world map into the machine, and attached a probe to the letter with the new runes. We would not have to ask true/false questions to the envelope, the needle would simply spin in progressively smaller circles until it found a hit, and then it would react. "It's not doing anything," Marina said, as it made its way nearly to the center without a reaction. But then right at the North Pole, the needle circled around three times and made the Star of David symbol. "Great," said Rena, "he lives in Santa's Village."

## Chapter 27: Journey

### JAVERT

Chastity Javert here. We are here at a house near Dark Hedges, an area of scrub between Armoy and Stranocum in County Antrim, Northern Ireland. I am packing my bags in preparation for a trip northward to the North Pole, as the weather is slightly colder than I am dressed for. Okay, maybe more than slightly. I slip on some thermal stockings, a black stretchy dress made from material that wicks moisture, and a hat and jacket made from the fur and lined with the blubber of an adult polar bear.

I know my viewers are shocked. But this single polar bear

supplied coats and hats for all of us (it was larger than normal), and in fact, contrary to those sensational photo shots of polar bears struggling to stay on icebergs to show global warming/climate destruction, this shot was actually taken during the summer. Between May and October, the icebergs do indeed melt. But polar bears deal with this year after year. Polar bears are not endangered, even though they have been listed as Vulnerable or Threatened. This listing has more to do with people lobbying for this status that actual fact. When the polar bear was listed as "threatened" by the administration of former US President George W Bush, officials invoked a special rule saying the Endangered Species Act could not be used to regulate greenhouse gas emissions. In other words, this was all about lobbying for climate action, and very little to do with their actual status.

Oh yes, some polar bears are killed by Inuits or when they make a nuisance of themselves. But for 35 years, a zoologist named Dr Susan Crockford, corrected failed predictions of global warming and polar bear extinction panic. "*The people of Nunavut are not seeing starving, desperate bears - quite the opposite. Yet polar bear specialists are saying these bears are causing problems because they don't have enough sea ice to feed properly. The facts on the ground make their claims look silly, including the abundance of fat bears. Residents are pushing their government for a management policy that makes protection of human life the priority,*" she said. Data published since 2017 show that global polar bear numbers have continued to increase slightly since 2005, despite the

fact that summer sea ice in 2018 was again at a low level not expected until mid-century: the predicted 67% decline in polar bear numbers did not occur. And National Geographic received such a profound backlash from its widely viewed "This is what climate change looks like" starving polar bear video, released in late 2017, that in 2018 it made a formal public apology for spreading misinformation.

So you see, dear viewers, one polar bear was not going to make a difference. I killed it humanely and gave its liver to Vitamin A pill manufacturers, as none of us could eat that. The rest of it was turned into bear meat for our journey.

We lined up on our seats in groups of two, with me sitting next to Marina, Rena and Alicia sitting together, Autumntwig and Aellisa, and Arboria and the camera person were sitting in the cockpit. The group all seemed to be flat earthers as I discovered, but regardless of their opinions, they were right that at the North Pole, that all area approached a central point. This meant that if you headed north from Utqiagvik, Alaska or Franz Josef Land (Земля́ Фра́нца-Ио́сифа) in Russia, or from Ireland where we were, they all converged in a single point. All of us agreed on this, but we started arguing when I insisted that the same thing happens for the South Pole. "South Pole?!?" Rena said, "there is no South Pole! The land expands outward until you get an arctic rim, and then there are outer Earths after that." I found this absurd and asked her proof. She claimed she had been on the Earth for much longer than I had, and had seen it herself.

"Maybe," I said, "I'd believe you if weren't so *old* and senile." This got a rise out of her, and I could see veins bulging near her forehead. The others managed to calm us down before Rena unintentionally made the chopper crash.

It takes 17 hours to go from our location in Ireland to the "North Pole" in Fairbanks Alaska (which is actually nowhere near the North Pole, being only 64°45′04″N latitude when the actual one is 90°N), nor the "North Pole" in New York, nor several mountains or towns by that name in Idaho, Kansas, Oklahoma, or even a bar in Western Australia, so I really had no idea what I was in for in terms of travel time. Especially since all Google Maps searches told me "No flights appear to be available." That's nice but I was wanting a trip estimate. Needless to say, it was a long trip through areas of perpetual light (What? You thought I was going to say darkness?) before we landed at our destination on a Friday, at between nine and twelve o'clock in the morning, about three days before Easter Sunday in April. I left my watch at home, and the magnetism was disrupting my cellphone, so the time was a mystery.

At this time of year, temperatures were much colder than in North Pole, Alaska (seriously, what a joke) but -22°F was Easter would come in April 20th this year, and it was set to warm up to above freezing in May. I stepped out of the chopper and shivered in my Gore-Tex boots as I stood in several inches of snow and ice. I looked around, "There's nothing here!" Well, there was snow and ice for miles, but

yes, there was basically nothing around. Rena also looked around, "How can this be? This is definitely the geographic North Pole. Should we try the magnetic North Pole next? Wait, no the machine didn't show us the magnetic pole, it pointed right to the center. It should be right here." The others wandered around before Arboria and Aellisa pointed to something and muttered excitedly to one another. "What's up?" I asked them. Aellisa explained, "There's a strangely shaped shadow right above us. I think there's an island up there!" And so, we took my helicopter straight up, even though Arboria really wanted to plant a giant beanstalk. No offense, but that idea seemed dangerous.

Up there, there indeed was a floating island. The rock and metal was holding the mass together nicely, and the island bobbed up and down as though it had density light enough to float in air instead of water. Before continuing on, I reminded everyone to spend time resting and acclimating their bodies. Decompression sickness was nothing to sneeze at, and we wanted to be sure that we dealt with this sooner rather than suddenly while in a battle, so I had everyone rest and receive oxygen in some tents. We also tried to rest in the tents.

But we never got to rest. No sooner did the treatment finish than we found the tent ripped up by icicles launched from outside. Moving out of the tent, there were some odd creatures that the others described as ice elementals. The others had no problem dealing with those attacking them, but

one of them launched an icicle at me!

Panicking, I extending my arms protectively in front of me while my life flashed before me. Instead of a life history, a damned showtune got stuck in my head, and I blurted out the words, "*24601!*"

In front of my hands, in the direct path of the icicle, runes gathered together and some sort of stone prison cell formed around the projectile, containing it before it hit me. What just happened?

ALICIA

I had heard of this phenomenon from my memories of the past. Some people, when first learning the thaumaturgy or magic, would draw it from personal associations, resulting in what is called unique magic. Books, movies, and other symbols tended to be their drawing point for spell casting. Then later, they would learn how to use more regular effects. When this happened, the words used for an effect, or cast words, didn't match the words of the effect. In The Advanced Compendium of Supernatural Magic and Effects, this spell was known as Imprisoning Protection, and the description of it read, «The Imprisoning Protection spell is a box of energy that is made to resemble a stone cell. It is hollow in the middle, allowing creatures to be placed inside it. While it looks as normal stone, it is several times more dense, able to shrug off magic and physical blows alike. Multiple instances of Imprisoning Protection can be stacked atop each other, and it is possible to climb these cells.» But I knew why she

thought of those random numbers. It was lyrics to a song she apparently liked.

*Look down, look down*
*Don't look 'em in the eye*
*Look down, look down*
*You're here until you die*

*Now prisoner 24601*
*Your time is up*
*And your parole's begun*
*You know what that means*

*Yes, it means I'm free*

*No! Follow to the letter your itinerary*
*This badge of shame you'll show until you die*
*It warns you're a dangerous man*

*I stole a loaf of bread*
*My sister's child was close to death*
*And we were starving*

*You will starve again*
*Unless you learn the meaning of the law*

*I know the meaning of those 19 years*
*A slave of the law*

*Five years for what you did*
*The rest because you tried to run*
*Yes, 24601*

*My name is Jean Valjean*
*And I am Javert*
*Do not forget my name!*
*Do not forget me, 24601.*

I always found it funny that the other Javert expects Valjean to remember his name but is reluctant to extend the same favor. Anyway, as you can see, it was easy to understand how this was the name of the first bit of magic that she ever cast. In any case, the rest of us managed to dispense with the opposition, and went to check out the front door of Belial's Castle. It was locked tightly.

## Chapter 28: A Mighty Fortress

ALICIA

I first checked for locks to pick, but the door was free from any holes or indentations. There was nothing in the way of tumblers and no keys to insert. The door appeared solid to all forms of penetration, but then I had a thought. I started working through the motions of the 103-form Yang style. After I finished, the door lit up and disappeared. It was obvious why this should work. For lack of a better phrase, because it should. The Tao was mysterious and all-emcompassing, it accepted everything and thus everything was able to accept it. For this reason, I knew that such a door

that had no keys involved would naturally give way.

Inside the building an iron gate blocked the entrance forward in the lobby. I tried to climb the metal fencing, but the wall went from so short that a child could climb over it to impossibly high. To the right of the gate, I noticed a small series of circular trays. Obviously, the maker of this gateway had played *Castlevania: Lament of Innocence*, and the idea of setting up a castle keyed to several sections before the main one could be opened was appealing. And so, we had to scatter throughout the complex to find various orbs to put into the tray.

The yellow orb involved a long illusory maze. This illusion was not of magic, but through the use of mirrors and perspective. Autumntwig eventually figured it out, but she made it a point to use her earth powers to smash every single mirror, as the puzzle irritated the hell out of her. After that, she simply walked the maze, and found a spot that was out of place, pulled a lever and collected the orb.

The blue orb was in a room filled with water. Marina fought off some sea creatures and dove deep underwater to grab the item. I later noticed that there was a lever on the other side of the room and a platform across, and anyone attempting to do this puzzle wasn't supposed to be an actual mermaid. Oh well.

The gray orb was guarded by a Rube Goldberg puzzle. A series of cranks pulled some giant steel balls up a slope in buckets, then dropped them off where they rolled down a hill.

As the rolled past, they turned gears, which moved a circular bar, which in turn added momentum to a series of spinning fans that guarded the  before the steel made it back to the buckets.  The spinning motion of the fans in turn moved the buckets.  It was a rather impossible perpetual motion machine, but somehow despite grossly violating all possible laws of thermodynamics, the machine continued moving without overheating or draining itself of energy.  Aellisa was fascinated why this could be, but eventually Rena poked her, and she sighed.  A quick reshaping of the wood and metal and the gray orb dropped from its spot, where she scooped it up.

The red orb was guarded by large amounts of lava and fire, and sat on a pillar high in the room.  Rena worked Javert through how to use her power, and she made steps leading up toward the pillar in a loose spiral.  But the room was still very hot, so Rena used one of her racial powers called Firefox in order to surround her body with a shell of heat so that the contrast would not hurt her body.  Firefox was powerful, fast, and secure just like the browser of the same name, and not like that crappy Google Chrome browser.  Yes, I just did free advertising, now gimme money.  In case, Rena made it all the way up to the top of the room, jumped down, and then killed the human torch effect so that the red orb wasn't going to hurt if it was touched later.

The last orb was green, and was guarded by a wooden dummy.  The dummy somehow shrugged off damage from all spells, as demonstrated when Rena tried to burn it to the

ground. It also copied movements, making it difficult to pass. It seemed an easy solution to simply outnumber it, but when we did, an equal number of dummies blocked our path. Was I nothing more than a dummy?!? While I dealt with this existential crisis, Arboria tried her hand, creating wood vines to hold it in place, and then infesting it with wood rot. The dummy crumbled into dust, and she continued onward, grabbing the last one. We now were clear to insert these keys into the gate.

## Chapter 29: Oracle of Tao

ALICIA

I had finally solved all of the puzzles of Belial's Castle. And so, I added each key to its respective tray, and the little orbs sat as they were scanned by some sort of technology I guess. Or was it magic? The gray orb lit first, turning white. Next was the red orb, then blue. The yellow and green orbs wouldn't light, so I rearranged them. That did the trick, and the gate swung open.

"Alright, guys, I guess we should go face Belial..." I said, before looking around. It was like someone queued the opening screen of *Tales from the Darkside*, as reality started to shift and I guess I could put it, flip over. One minute, I was here with my friends, triumphant that we has solved the puzzles and were soon ready to put down Belial. The next, I was surrounded on all sides by a colorless mist. It wasn't even grey, nor was it clear, it had no color.

I turned around and saw my friends' ... faces. I was about

to say, "Ah, there you are..." when I realized that I couldn't remember my friends' names. And as I looked from one to another, I couldn't hold on to the memory of their names. It might be tempting to compare it to that creepy scene at the end of *Final Fantasy VIII*. You know, the one where Squall forgets what Rinoa looks like. But it wasn't quite like that.

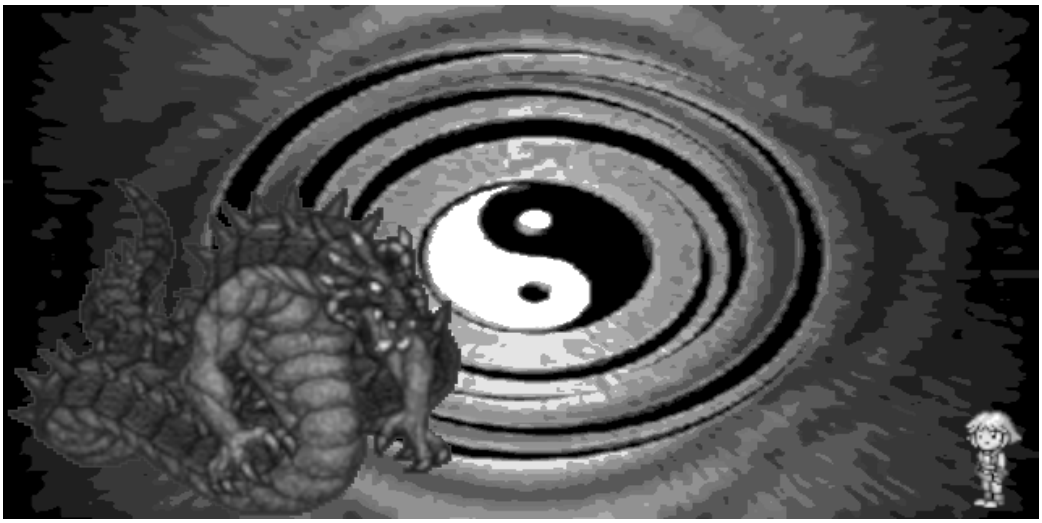
For one thing, rather than forgetting things, I remembered all sorts of obscure references. Second, it wasn't actual prosopagnosia (the inability to see faces). Rather, I increasingly couldn't tell one person from another. When I saw Rena's face, instead of looking at a strikingly beautiful person that I loved, I saw a character from *dot hack*, and suddenly I remembered that Momo was the cute reaper girl in *Shinigami no Ballad* (her name also meant "Peach", which was something that popped up in Japanese legend, and also a hallucinogenic fruit in the film *Labyrinth*), Marina was everything from several actual marinas to a couple of French actresses. Everything down to listening Welcome to theBlack Parade on Youtube only to see something about a kid in a parade an hour later on television, or even where I was born got over associated (leading to Biblical references to Sharon), everywhere I was, everyone I met, everything that happened... it was all just a symbol.

Gradually, Rena and her friends disappeared from my memory. And then they disappeared from my sight. For all I was aware, I had no friends, just delusions from my mind to convince me that I was loved. I was an adopted child. How

could event my parents love me? The colorless mist became a deeper and darker shade of colorless all around me, as my mood likewise darkened. For the next several hours, I muttered to myself, "Nothing is real, nothing is real, nothing is real, nothing is real..."

In the middle of cycling through my own memories, I had a random image flash through my mind of one night. That night while I was living with my folks, I had curry with rice that was extra spicy. Instead of adding yogurt to the curry as most people do, I added it to the rice. The result was that the curry remained hot, and the rice tasted mild. Rather than try to change what curry was, I had decided to accept things as they were, and the result was an interesting taste experience, as I fluctuated from hot to cold. As I thought about this strange memory, other memories surfaced.

I remembered that I was the Oracle of Tao, in particular. And while I had never learned the final technique, how to master the Tao, something about this memory was like yanking at a thread. Other attached memories surfaced, of times where I hadn't deserved what I got at all. Where much like that curry, nobody had bothered to add anything to me, but loved me as I was. Such memories began to cut through the progressively darkening colorlessness. Without my effort, the Tao appeared. Like a lantern, its light and dark shone through the colorlessness, and I found myself facing Belial.



The Tao was my weapon, for sure, but as I became aware of what it was, I realized just how much it was a double-edged sword. I actually understood that despite summoning it, I now had no control over it. It was as though I had called a wild dog that could hurt me as easily as what I intended it to guard, but at the moment such power was sleeping.

What it was actively doing was testing my resolve. I tried to bluff my way through, "Hear me, Belial! I have come to destroy you. I have been trained by the fox spirit Rena, and now I have mastered such power." The Tao sensed my bravado, and revealed the truth and lie of it. As if to say, *Oh really?* I now was being treated to images of all the times that Rena could have trained me harder, but we goofed off. I couldn't read minds, so I had no idea why she did it. Though suspect she just wanted to spend time with me.

But there was always doubt. Maybe I couldn't trust Rena

after all. Belial sensed my uncertainty, and started laughing. "REALLY NOW," he said, "HOW CAN YOU KNOW YOU CAN TRUST HER?" I remembered when I thought she was a spy, and how many spooks were out of control government types trying to rule over others, how people from the FBI occasionally went after taxpayers, how CIA spooks would occasionally run scenarios to figure out how their country was vulnerable (by doing it), and so on. Now I was pretty sure she was not a spy now, but the fact remained that Rena was not a human. Maybe she was working with Belial. Maybe she even led all those demons to our town!

The Tao was faith and doubt. When I believed in myself and felt good, I had full control over it. When I wavered, even someone like Belial was able to use it against me. Even if it was right, I couldn't doubt her. And yet, I couldn't just switch on trust of someone. I had to be sure.

"I know how you can trust someone," Rena told me. "Where did you come from?" I asked, "You disappeared!" She asked rhetorically, "Why do you think that is? It's because you got trapped by an illusion and forgot about me. Look, I know that as a gumiho, I'm a super-tricky fox. That's the reputation I have. But my tricks are mostly pranks. When it comes to something real, I don't lie. So here's the real thing. Since you were young, we have been friends, even though I was older than you because I was young for a nine-tailed fox. Lies belong in Belial's illusion. But while Belial can plant doubt, I couldn't appear here if I were lying

about caring about you." Marina, Arboria, and all the others showed up too, "Neither could we." Rena continued, "I didn't train you hard because I wanted to spend time with you, and I hoped you *wouldn't* be here, risking your life against him. I wanted you to know how to make peace, not war." With that, my trust was restored. Some doubt always exists, but I realized I did have friends.

With that, the Tao began to turn, moving against him. "THIS CANNOT BE!" he said. I was just about to turn the Tao against him, when I had a thought.

And this thought made the Tao react. Suddenly reality fell away, but not as it had before, when Belial summoned up that depressing mist. A white empty space as far as the eye can see was decorated only with myself and a sleep girl in a sleeping bag apparently resting in midair. "Oh hey!" the girl said after yawning, "What's up?" I looked around, "What is this place?" She introduced herself as God. "Yeah, right," I rolled my eyes, "if you were really God you would be able to..." She manifested a bowl of Korean barbecue, "...Summon the food that you happen to be thinking about? Yes, I can do that." I asked God, "Why am I here?" And she answered, "Human beings are born in order to discover their purpose in life." I clarified, "No, why am I **here**?" God answered, "Oh that. The Oracle of Tao has the ability to get in touch with the nature of reality. You were about to finish off Belial when you thought better of it. But that's not how you got here." I asked why. "The Tao ability is part of reality and the

relationship between self and others," she explained, "So when you use it to hurt others, you feel their pain. And when you use it in battle the first time, whether or not you go through with things, it puts you in contact with the truth of reality."

I asked, "Why exactly did I hold back anyway?" She shrugged, "It's because of who you are. You are a person who cares about immortals. You don't connect normally with the rest of humanity because you see people as connected in strange ways. You would assume anyone who treated you a certain way is Rena. This makes you ideal for protecting her, but you cannot be a savior to the world. You cannot defeat Belial this way. And yet, you have the opportunity to do something greater. Belial is a leader of demons. As long as you stand against him, he continues to hunt down humans in search of the Oracle. But what the demons need is a happy ending. I will send another Oracle to deal with him, but if he is defeated now, demons will be enslaved." I didn't want that to happen to those poor suffering demons.

My mind flashed back to a long conversation with Rena earlier. I had just asked her to explain in depth what the Oracle of Tao was. She said, "You remember religious scriptures about the Messiah, right?" I nodded. She continued, "And stories about the coming of the Antichrist?" I shrugged, then nodded again. Personally, having lived through all of that, and mostly rejected it, I was kind of skeptical. But yes, I had heard of it. So she told me, "The

Oracle of Tao is like... if you merged these two together. If Jesus is God incarnate, think of the Oracle as the encapsulation of what it means to be human. They are capable of good, great evil, and ummm great neutrality. The Oracle can be on the side of God or oppose God, they can work on behalf of humanity or ignore humans, they can create or destroy. The power of the Oracle is the power to make choices and affect reality."

I wanted a world where everyone won. I remembered as an adult, reading the manga version of *Legend of Zelda*, and concluding that the Triforce was a metaphor for a literary trinity: hero, lover, and villain. But in that moment, I remembered that I had suspected Rena, so she was the hero, the lover, and the villain. She was the hero in my story (not me), I definitely loved her, but she could also be the one I fought. And I thought of what would happen if Rena were in need and had to steal or kill to survive. We were all connected in the grand scheme of things. If I acted in violence and killed Belial, I became the villain. It was near midnight. Tomorrow was Easter, and I wanted to leave a legacy of forgiveness. Even if it meant my life.

And so, the heroic thing to do would be die to save something. And so, I allowed the Tao to backlash against me, destroying my body completely. Life, death, and everything in between are all choices we humans are allowed to make.

As I made this choice, my last thoughts were of a strange game I had played during my gaming days. *Bravely Default*,

it was called. In it, a group of four heroes (Tiz Arrior, Agnès Oblige, Edea Lee, and Ringabel) fight in order to awaken four crystals. On the surface, it seems like a regular "Hero, save the world and get the crystals" story, but the story was slightly deceptive. The fairy that sent them on this quest (Airy) insisted each crystal be overcharged. As the story went on, we discovered that Airy was actually a horrid larval monster bent on drilling a dimensional hole through realities in order to release her demon leader. You had a choice between endings. Once you found out about Airy, you could rapid-fire tap the button to basically crack open the crystal, during which Airy would beg and plead with you, and then eventually turn into a monster and attack you. Or you could continue to cooperate in her plan until the countdown reached zero, in hopes of being able to stop her master.

The word default has a an interesting meaning, as it means both to surrender, and to just keep doing what you're doing, effectively carrying the meaning of both choices. In this life, all we really have are the friends we make and the choices we make. I only hoped Rena would understand my choices. Sorry, Rena...

RENA

"No," I gasped, watching something go wrong with the Tao, and Alicia suddenly disappearing from reality. I didn't understand why she had to do that. My nightmare had come true.

Belial ranted in his creepy demonic voice about how now

that the Oracle was gone, nothing would stop him from totally taking control, and darkening the world with evil and destruction. And honestly, I couldn't see anything I could do to stop him. "I think not," said a voice. We both turned around. Jesus was fully embodied, where usually he was a sort of super-ghost that could bypass walls yet become solid enough to eat food.

He explained, "I did not save the Jews from the Romans. I did not save them from the Nazis either. They thought that a Savior should save the physical world. I did not save the world from you either time, because it's up to you to live your life and make decisions. I came to save the world from sin, not to condemn it because of sin. But you are caught in your sin. It's time for the world to have a time out from you, while you reflect on the harm you have done to this world. Or not, up to you. The point being, this world is polluted, and God is going to make a new one. You won't get to corrupt this one." So saying, he said the word, and his father summoned a host of angels. Two in particular named Michael and Estheriel grabbed him while he screamed. Now these angels looked more like Justin Bieber or Zac Efron than big burly bouncers, but this was effectively what they were. Angelic powers have the ability conjure objects, and they created the highest purity weapons against him, along with a *Jūzō no Gyakusetsu Fūjikome Tsubo* (literally "13th paradox containment urn").

Now this urn was so named because it ran on a number of

paradoxes. For example, the urn was so weak that Belial could easily use suggestion  or illusion powers without limitation, yet any amount of force including his full power or that of every being in the universe be of no avail.  This included God, it was a paradox because it was an urn that God had made that he could not break (directly).  Yet simply gathering thirteen keystones paired with the urn, and waiting for an eclipse would be enough to weaken the urn's power. Lastly, there was the paradox of Belial being dead yet alive (having been killed prior to being shoved in), cut into thirteen pieces (the keys) but being whole (inside the jar), and an living spirit but a dead body inside a jar.  God obviously expected him to be released as the angels explained that *when* Belial was removed from his urn, he would live again. They did not even pretend they said *if*.  Estheriel seemed to dislike this, mumbling something about free will being evil.

Over the next thousand years, the darkness would consolidate, turning the Earth into a world of Void.  But God spend his time splitting the darkness away from people living there, taking the people there to a New Earth, created specifically to start over.  Only these humans didn't start as dumb apes.  They had the benefit of history from the old Earth, and could try new things.  That was great and all. But I was done here.  I didn't want to keep living.

# Epilogue

## RENA

I couldn't take a world without Alicia. I had known her

well before she became a man, and had waited for her for centuries. Now she was gone. History would remember the First Oracle as Emett, a male, forgetting how fabulous she looked in heels, a dress, and pantyhose. According to prophecy, even though Belial was supposed to have won, his time really was not to be very long. He would be stuffed in an urn for awhile, and the Earth was to be remade. So said the prophecy mention in the book *Oracle of Tao*. And the next Oracle, Ambrosia Brahman, would one day avenge her. But all of this was hollow. There was no hope now.

"No worries!" I heard a voice say. And turned, and there was Jesus. The Bible said that "whenever two or three are gathered together, I will be in the midst of them," and also that all believers are the body of Christ. That is to say that Jesus can be found within his followers. But if the followers are in despair or overcome by evil, as it was for a long time until we took action to remind humanity of their roots, the salvation of Jesus is limited. For a long time, it was like the kingdom of God had a dark veil cast over it. Nothing can destroy God's kingdom, but as long as people do not remember grace, it is difficult for people to see it.

Jesus had always been among people, as far back (and farther) as the man striking Jacob's hip. But when he raised from the dead, he was no longer flesh and blood but part of the nature of humans. This was good in that he could talk through literally anyone, offering salvation to those in dire need. But in times of great darkness, it was often difficult to

hear him. As it was now.  Jesus's body floated free of any constraints, and I was tempted to just ignore this transcendent spiritual being. But part of me wondered how he could still say "no worries" under such circumstance. Even to me, who routinely said that to Emett for a couple years before she was Alicia. "It's fine. I understand you are upset. But if you want, I can reunite you with her," Jesus explained, "all you need to do is leave your body."

This was too much. "On top of following your path losing me my dearest, you want me to die?!? Have you not had enough?" I screamed. Jesus shook his head, then faced me calmly, "I know of a way where both of you can be together. But for too long have I had no means to speak with these people directly. Give me your body, and I will release your soul to meet his."

"Alright," I said, "Jesus take the wheel."And then, I felt a soul enter and possess my body, and my own soul being forced out.

JESUS

I was Rena now. I had a fox girl's body that could shapeshift, an immortal physical body in addition to being part of all humanity. I could not have done this without her consent. I would use this body one day to help the Oracle of Tao. I would use it to save the lives of people and reshape the world. But I would also use it to live the life I had never gotten to experience, the life that was cut short by a crucifixion. I had come again. But I was here to save the

world, not to condemn it. And I was here in order so that others might finally hear my message. I could no longer die, after all. Nor could anything harm me.

Years later, I would be told that I could not leave the city of Kushiyama. But that was just as I planned it. I wanted to meet this Ambrosia, and guide her on her quest. And I would revive faith as Rena had, these many years ago. I would be Jesus in the flesh. Not some faraway Jesus that is supposed to come at some imaginary end times, but once again one that could eat and drink, who could teach people what it meant if ever they should forget that God died for them on the cross. Before, they could not only see me as through a mirror dimly, but now anyone could meet me face to face. I have returned.

I carried Rena's baby to term, then I helped an orphanage find a good family for the child. It was a little girl. I would raise her myself, but she wasn't mine to raise, she was Alicia's and Rena's. So I gave her a name before giving her to a mom. The child was named Alicia, in memory of Rena's experiences. Alicia grew up like her mother, a powerful gumiho in her own right. But she never stopped missing her biological parents. Every once in awhile, I visited her, even though she didn't know that I had given birth to her. In the years to come, she became happily married and had a large family of gumiho children of her own. When darkness threatened to destroy the Earth, she and her family was moved to the New Earth with everyone else who chose to leave. As for the other Alicia...

ALICIA

I was not dead. My soul had simply left my body. The result of realizing what all Oracles realize meant that I was no longer part of the physical world. I was a spirit, free to experience the world. I saw the world from the time Belial seemed to win, up to the time where Michael and Estheriel sealed him in the urn. I say the miasma of his evil continuing to pollute the Earth, until finally the Earth was divided into the Void and the New Earth. I saw various religious figures coming to claim their followers. I saw even the atheists coming to be rescued, though their salvation was a smoke and mirrors job (basically, Jesus appeared to them as some trust scientist, who got them all to take a "spaceship" to a new world. They actually entered a portal to the New Earth, but they saw what they saw in secular terms). All of these were either taken to some sort of Afterlife or to the New Earth.

My parents didn't live to see the New Earth (they were not old, I just happened over the next thousand years), but they had a child of their own not long after I left reality. They had a happy life, so I can't complain.

I saw the world being made anew, and centuries to follow. I saw Marina, Arboria, Aellisa, and Autumntwig living out their immortal lives in happiness in the New Earth. Aellisa became the mother of the powerful wood elf Siofra Athanasius. Autumntwig set up shop from Rena's old spy program, teaching a generation of humans illusion magic.

Arboria started planting trees to make the New Earth a pretty place to live. Wars came and destroyed some of that, but afterwards, she helped the humans rebuild, and they were inspired by her commitment to peace to such an extent that the kings of Phoenix, Kushiyama, and other countries worked with her to help set something they called the Council. And Marina went below the sea to carve a series of stone tablets in Atlantis recording the original Earth's history into a series of murals. While she was down there, she spent time with a young selkie girl who seemed a little creepy to me. I saw them meet up every year, in memory of the time Rena and I hung out with them. But as Rena wasn't Rena anymore but went by Jesus now, and I was kinda removed from existence, there was always a feeling of loss. Yet their lives seemed pretty good now that they no longer had to worry about Belial's influence.

I might have continued watching for all time, but then I saw her. It was Rena. Her soul had also become discorporate. "Hey there," Rena said. Said I, "Hey yourself! What are you doing here? I missed you so much!" We just stared at each other for awhile, and then our spirit bodies hugged. "It is not good for man to be alone," God had said. And so, we spent the time we had with each other, each day different. Once upon a dream, we all lived together in a Town of Winter.

AMBROSIA

My adopted family told me this story. Before the Earth we know of now, there was another created, with eons of history.

The world had all kinds of plants and animals, and people worshiping a bunch of different religions. Despite what they thought, God didn't care whether they worshiped one or another, just so long as they took care of the Earth, and each other. But they couldn't even get that right! I mean, how hard is it, really? So, God intervened… God split the world into light and darkness, a world of Existence and a world of Void. Anyway, I don't really care about history. The only thing I know is, a few thousand years ago, God made a prophecy. If evil ever came again, God would send an Oracle to bring the universe back to balance… and stuff. But that'll never happen...

# BONUS BOOK:
## Tales from the Reaper

# PROLOGUE

## Rinne

Greetings. This is not a tale of humans, though it involves humans. This is a tale of us, the Reapers. We are not mortal, we are not human, though to humans we generally look like them. With some exceptions, of course. Most humans are not nine feet tall and built like a Greek statue. Most humans do not look like they are in a perpetual state of just past their teenage years. And most humans do not have a full-time job of managing some aspect of existence. God created the Heavens and the Earth. Angels manage the bureaucracy. As for us, we are the "backstage crew". They seldom speak of us, except to spread that horrible legend about Reapers claiming souls. My friend Yomi does do that, but she always walks around like this pained look on her face. Being a Reaper of Death (or as all humans call her, a Grim Reaper) is hard. My other friend Seishi, the Reaper of Birth, always tries to lighten the mood. When I was first paired with the two of them, I thought she was just goofing off, and not serious about her job, but then I noticed she has even more souls to deal with on an average day than Yomi. They are old friends, and by old, I mean they have been around since Creation, and friends for almost as long. She can usually tell when Yomi is feeling depressed about her job, and these pranks of hers are well-timed.

Our job isn't as difficult as it sounds, though. We do get assistants. You've even seen them. The Pales look like bees or

crows, or in some cases midwives. There are only seven Reapers, but thousands upon thousands of Pales assisting in the minor tasks. These assist the role of the Reaper, and all of us get them, except for two of us. Jin, Reaper of Free Will, has very little to do, since she only has to act when free will is threatened, so she has no need of assistants. Bosatsu, the only male Reaper, on the other hand, has a job nobody else can do; as Reapers, we exist in the Unseen World, the world governing the underpinnings of nature, physical laws (including even the magic that you humans wield), and so on. We draw our power from existence in this world, yet Bosatsu someone creates the rules of the world that creates the rules for your world. My head hurts just thinking about the logic of this.

Besides Yomi and Seishi, and those two I just mentioned, there is also Chiku (Reaper of Nature), Engaku (Physics), and me. Who am I? I'm Rinne, the Reaper of the Afterlife. I work together with Yomi and Seishi most days, because birth, death, and the Afterlife are all intertwined. Likewise, Chiku and Engaku work together sometimes as the natural world needs physical laws to help things happen, but even though that erupting volcano needs mathematical extrapolation on how fast its lava should flow, and the force that boulders roll down a certain mountain, they generally don't get along well. Engaku is far too logical, while Chiku is the closest thing to a tree-hugger that exists among Reapers. I suppose they do better than Jin and Bosatsu, though. They never have anything to talk about.

We're a motley bunch, and I have no idea why beings like us were given feelings in the first place. When God isn't sleeping, she says something about how we need a human touch to better relate with the created world. But this doesn't make sense to me.

Each day, we carry out our tasks, relating with people, plants, animals, or even bacteria, and touching their lives. Their lives touch other lives, so much so that a horse not having a shoe might lose a war, or a bee stinging one man to death might result in the world never having a cure for a certain disease. The smallest detail matters.

And sometimes we do not realize this until it is too late...

## SICK GIRL

### Rinne

The city of Kushiyama...

My first mission as a Reaper began here. Each Reaper has a duty. My duty involves guiding souls to the Afterlife. But my job often starts well before a person's death. Such as here, where the person is dying of disease, there are times we can help. But...

We are sworn to certain things. We can prevent a death, but once someone is dead and Yomi claims them, we can't go back and try to change it. We can't use human currency. We can't enter locked buildings, at least, not ones that are not immediately relevant to our mission. We cannot eat mortal

food while on the job. We can only be seen by people we touch, the old, or those who are so spiritually sensitive that we have no say in the matter. Elves are one of the few species that do business with us, as they are willing to accept the ghost paper, and they can see us plain as day. Basically, we couldn't draw attention to the existence of Reapers. There are rules, and sometimes these rules make things difficult.

In this town, in this time, a girl lies dying of such an illness. This poor girl, what will become of her?

It was eight hours in the morning, at the year that humans call 7065 Anno Domini. I say that this was my first mission, but we do not observe time in the same way humans do. We enter the physical world at points in time, and they may not be in order chronologically. And so, while this was my first mission, there were missions before it that came later.

I stood outside the door, then I phased inside along with Yomi and Seishi. Yomi already seemed sad. This girl was sick from the Plague. The Plague had no good name, so they just called it the Plague, but it has very distinct symptoms. Bonelike growths would form inside the body, slowly crystallizing into masses that would block blood vessels, organs, and eventually the person would die from one of their majorgans being pinned. Only the Rare Herb was able to cure her. That and a Reaper's healing, but that wasn't happening. Healing tended to leave a brilliant light, and that would draw attention to our presence. If she was alone in the house, that would be one thing, but her father was standing right nearby.

And the Plague was a highly visible disease that was difficult for humans just to suddenly recover from. A Pale could possibly help her heal if this were a simple illness or minor wounds, but the Plague has always been a nuisance.

I touched her. It was better than if Yomi did, since Yomi tended to scare people, even though it was difficult to imagine the morose Reaper even worrying anyone. My touch was calming though, while hers gave off a dark and somber aura. The ginger-haired girl of about six opened her eyes with a pained look. "Hey there," I said, "how are you feeling?" When we touched someone, they could see and hear us, but this moment happened in between time. Other people wouldn't see it, even her father right over there. Which was for the best, her father looked imposing, for a human anyway. "It hurts so much..." she groaned. "Don't worry, we're going to get you some medicine. Your pain will be over soon." Her eyes looked like giant discs of pure sadness as she looked at us with a pleading stare. She nodded, "Okay. I'll wait..."

We took a look at the door, and were immediately outside. The cobblestone house was small and quaint, but being part of a large city meant it was adjoined to other buildings. The entire town was walled into various districts. Kushiyama was ruled by a corrupt leader named King Kushiyama, but all of his subjects dubbed him King Yama for his harsh taxes. As Reapers, we had no need to worry about such things, but it helped explain why most of the shopkeepers were actually stationed outside rather than owning their own shops. The

bustle of the town rang out, villagers hawking various wares. Later on, we'd need to find a medic to transform the herb from a chewy leaf to a smooth serum.

"But were do we find the Rare Herb?" I asked the others after leaving the building. Seishi supplied, "Chiku knows everything about plants." Yomi reminded me, "You went to her when you had that really bad growth on your arm, remember?" I made a throat-slitting move with my hand as if to tell her never to talk about that again. In any case, since I knew how to fight, I was ready to head out alone. Just then, soft hands grabbed me...

"You're going to see Chiku, right? Why don't you bring us along?" said Seishi. But Yomi shook her head, "Hey now. We mustn't force her." Agreeing with Yomi, I prepared again to walk off. I had decided that I didn't want to put them in any danger, after all. "Make sure you do your job quickly," Yomi warned, "You know I hate having to end lives." Some soft hands resting on my shoulder felt quite a bit firmer... "Oh no! You're not getting away that easily!" Seishi insisted, "Rinne, we're your friends, and we're coming!" Yomi sighed, "So forceful..."

The path to Chiku's realm was significantly more complicated than walking outside town and entering a forest, but this is exactly what we did. The difference is, while a normal person would exit Kushiyama and find an icy tundra for miles before making it to a forest, we cut through space and arrived just outside her forest, walking abruptly from

winter weather to deciduous forest. But this was no ordinary forest, rather it was an entrance to Chiku's personal domain. Within the forest, dense fog covered the land, and the warped space meant that even walking straight would result in seeing the same rock multiple times. Fortunately, I knew the proper path.

Heading north from the entrance, we went north again, then west, then east, then west again, then south, and then north, at each major intersection. We had been here before, so our way was clear, even if it made no sense. As we headed to the last intersection, a woman spoke to us, assuring us that we were almost there and to keep at it. But then, Yomi observed that she couldn't actually see, and suggested she was just saying this every few minutes as a way of urging on anyone who might be there. She pointed out the woman's cataracts fogging her eyes. I suppose it was still possible that she did see us, though. She was old, and what many people mistake for senility is actually the growing vision of the Unseen World that one acquires as one gets closer to death.

We exited this forest maze and entered a deeper section of the woods. This was called the Hidden Forest for a reason. It existed between multiple worlds flickering in and out of them from time to time, and more importantly, it hid everything inside its borders. In the middle of this forest, the slope to a large mountain unfolded.

Throughout this journey, we encountered spiders and snakes and goblins, but for the most part, these were no trouble at

all. The Reapers are pretty resilient, and their weapons are virtually unstoppable against creatures of the mortal world. Only Seishi held back. Each Reaper has two weapons, their scythe and their sacred artifact. Mine was the Staff of Love (the less of which is said, the better, as its only real power was to calm living creatures). Yomi's was a Sword of Sorrow, a weapon which could revive or even use the harm an adversary has dealt as a weapon against them, and which later found its way into other hands. And Seishi's was the Mirror of Faith, which deflected evil intent back at its source. But the scythes we possessed were far more versatile in actual combat. Yomi's scythe caused death with a touch. My scythe has no real powers of its own, but it had potential. It could be upgraded with elemental power by embedding gems in its side (for example, a ruby might add the ability to deal fire damage). Seishi's scythe was different. It healed living things, making it worthless for actual combat against creatures of this world. And so, she didn't fight.

We climbed this winding path to the top slowly. Not that it mattered, since the rock was sturdy and we were immortal. But falling to the bottom would be a major inconvenience. We moved past falling rocks from the various creatures scurrying above us, finally making it upward. Chiku lived in a glade inside the mountain; the mountain was hollow inside, and she had her own little garden in there. At the first major ledge before the cave, there was a mass of darkness. "A spirit! This might be tough," Yomi said. Did I mention I'm afraid of ghosts?

Yes, I know, that sounds insane, both because I'm a Reaper and because it is literally my job to transport those who have died to their afterlife. But spirits of this sort are not the nice balls of light that move on quietly to the Afterlife. A dark hunched body, claws, teeth, and empty blackness where the eyes would be, no legs to speak of and wide spikes all around the head instead of hair. This translucent being had hands disjoined from any shoulders or arms, and its entire body was blue-gray.

I mumbled, "There's no such thing as ghosts..." over and over again, even though I clearly was not in a position to ever say such a thing. I lunged forward swinging my scythe, but the blade passed through it as though cutting through water. I knew that even if Yomi's scythe could connect, her death effect would be worthless because it was technically already dead. I wagered, incorrectly, having never dealt with one, that the restless spirit couldn't hurt me as much as I couldn't hurt it. Instead, I got a pretty firm slash across my midsection. It wouldn't kill me, of course, but it certainly hurt.

"Leave this to me," said Seishi, "I can take 'em!" But her weapon only healed creatures of this world. How could it... I didn't finish that thought as I saw her slice through this thing as though I were watching a fine chef slice through sashimi. Of course. Her weapon couldn't harm creatures of this world, but an undead creature? It had already left the mortal coil. I wasn't clear why it healed some creatures and destroyed undead, but she seemed to understand it.

In any case, we entered the cave, and made our way to Chiku. She was surrounded by foliage. It was like being in a greenhouse, with the main difference being that her plants were literally climbing the walls while we watched. "Hey there, Chiku. Could I have one of your Rare Herbs?" I asked. "I created those herbs, but... my powers are malfunctioning and I grow these weeds too." I could see what she meant. The ground with filled with weeds that were at least the size of lettuce, with some reaching the size of trees. I chopped at them with my scythe, but they regrew within seconds to full size. Of course. These were her plants. "Here," said Yomi, "take mine."

Just as her touch felt different to others, causing abject terror while my touch brought calm, her scythe creeped me out the moment I felt it. It felt vaguely like I was holding an animal as it was rotting. The weapon felt like it squirmed in my hand and it was cold to the touch. I pulled out some gloves, and equipped them before touching it again. Then I swung away. They still tried to grow back despite the fact that they should be dead, but I kept them at bay far more easily, and moved fast enough back and forth that Chiku finally pointed to what looked like a small icicle radish, except the leaves were white and the radish part was green. She ran up to it, and slowly but firmly wiggled it out, being careful to get the entire plant. "Sorry," she said to the plant, "I need to move you to a less crowded area." She placed it in a raised bed, tore the leaves from it, and gave them to us. Then she poked as the scythe. I expected the plant to split apart the way she sliced at it, but

instead it regrew its leaves, then bolted and went to seed. Pretty soon there were a few more Rare Herbs, making it slightly less rare. "You'll need to hurry," she explained, "if her disease is like I think, you haven't got much time." We exited the mountain to the entrance of the forest, then entered Kushiyama again.

"Wait," said Seishi, "I wonder if we could go shopping?" Typical. Always trying to lighten the tension. "No, really, guys! I can just see her chewing and chewing on that thing. Little kids don't even like vegetables, how are we going to convince her to eat a strange herb?" She had a point, so we went to the marketplace. We walked past people selling flowers, ripe strawberries, milk, and one even offered to grind knives. Some were even singing to try to advertise their wares.

Then we saw a lonely older woman running an apothecary. Nobody seemed to care about her business because everyone was healthy. We didn't even have to touch her for her to notice, just get near. That wasn't a good sign, but I figured that was a mission for another day. She saw the Rare Herb that I held and nodded, "Yes I can make a tonic out of that. It should be easy to swallow, and easy to digest. It may take a few hours though." She set the herb into her mortar and pestle, turning and pounding, and pounding and turning. After alot of effort, she poured some liquid that I didn't notice, squeezed juice out of the herb, then drained the liquid aside and put it into a bottle.

We moved out of the marketplace, and headed through the door. I touched the girl, "Am I too late?" I poked the girl with my scythe. "Hi, wake up and drink this." She was a cute child, and I expected her to say something cute like "Noooo, it looks yucky!" But instead she whispered something to me that made my heart cold. No parent should ever hear their child utter these words, and it was not any better since we were Reapers.

She said, "I want to die."

Reapers respected wishes of the dying, provided they weren't extravagant like living 150 extra years. I pleaded to Yomi, "This isn't right..." She shook her head, "We aren't doctors. We aren't obligated to keep someone alive against their will. If she really wants this, it's her time, and we must respect her wishes." I stared at her sad face and her puppy dog eyes for a few more moments, then turned away. "Fine. Go ahead," I said. Yomi pulled out her scythe. When I had held it, I noticed this too. Everything goes grey for a second. No, not gray. Grey. You may say, "They're different spellings of the same word. Maybe grey is slightly more blue, but that's it." Well, you'd usually be right. But gray refers to the color, while grey we use as a term for when things are stripped of color. Antimagic, time stopping, even draining life or energy from a person. All of these are when things turn grey. And indeed she was draining from a person. Yomi didn't usually have to use her scythe much, they would just die if it was old age, and if it was an accident they'd be unconscious and

dying from bleeding. A pinprick would be enough. In fact, it seemed to traumatize her whenever she actually had to make a full swing. This little girl would die in a few weeks without medicine, but would live to adulthood with it. And yet, she couldn't see any of that. To her, the pain seemed too much for her little body. Yomi trembled with sadness. And then, Yomi finished her swing.

I guided Koren's soul through the Afterlife. In another version of events, she would grow up, she would meet and date a boy named Nevras, and then she'd move on and get married herself. She never really had any children though. But that future wasn't to happen here. Fortunately for her, she was young so she didn't have much guilt or regret.

When she died, her wish was simple. She wanted to be able to take care of her father in her next life. If only she'd had a full life on this Earth... But no matter how much we may want it, people don't live forever. This was my first lesson as Reaper of the Afterlife.

## ISEKAI

### Jin

Hi, I'm Jin. Typically, I don't do much as a Reaper, short of maybe tell Adolf Hitler that there are other options besides killing a bunch of Jews, Romani gypsies, gays, and the like. You can see how that went. But then again, I also convinced a bunch of other people to stand up to him, so it kinda all worked out.  I mainly act when people use their free will to

strip others of their free will. Or when people are at a crossroads, and need good advice. My words aren't always welcome, but they are honest.

ATARASHI CHIKYU

I'm a university student in America in a Sociology course with a minor in Women's Studies. I am male, but I've always felt like I should have been born female. White males have always been the oppressors of women and blacks, I mean, People of Color, throughout history. As for my country, I do not understand why such a racist evil country should be allowed to exist. I am thankful only that I am Japanese-American, and thus not guilty of some of the atrocities done by this country. At least, not on my mother's side. I am convinced that my father's people probably had been slaveowners somewhere in their past.

After a heated discussion with some racist who somehow made it into my school (such people shouldn't have the right to breathe the same air as me), I stormed off in a huff. Where did those people crawl out from, and how dare they think they can tell *me* that I'm the racist one? I angrily replayed their words in my head. "You think that you're helping out minorities, right? So why is it that all these courses, these 'studies' keep women and blacks in a culture of victimhood? People who actually work for a living generally break any past injustice within their own generation, but you as an Asian-American, who typically is one of the more successful minorities... You have instead chosen a field of study that will

qualify you for working at Starbucks and collecting welfare." I kept thinking about their words, looking for a snappy comeback, and walking ahead without looking. Pretty soon, I was in an intersection looking up arguments in response on my cellphone while holding a venti iced skinny hazelnut macchiato with extra cinnamon, when a large horn sounded. An oncoming truck was heading my way.

My field of vision faded for a moment. A tall blond woman in a rainbow-colored robe stood in front of me. It wasn't the LGBT Pride rainbow, but it had a calming effect on me nonetheless. Although she carried a sharp weapon (weapons are evil), she had a kind face, and eyes that convinced me that she would be a sympathetic party to my plight. "Maybe you might wanna get out of the way," she advised, shortly before the truck presumably slammed into me hard. I closed my eyes bracing for the impact.

The next thing I knew, I was in some kind of swirling empty space, staring at her in the face. Hey, maybe this was that *isekai* thing that I'd heard so much about! It was probably my time to be rewarded for my commitment to social justice. Maybe I'd be given incredible magical powers, a new body, and a harem of my own. I'd get to fight against leaders, and convince ancient cultures to treat minorities better and embrace globalism and diversity. All while attracting a catgirl, an angel, and a martial artist lady. Plus, I'd turn into a girl myself, since I'd always imagined being a lesbian woman instead of a mostly white male.

"So, what do I get?" I asked the tall woman. She looked at me with a confused look on her face, "What do you get? I don't..." I explained, "You're a deity here to send me to another world, right? I get to keep a cellphone, or I get special powers, or maybe I get a large harem of powerful women to fight for me. Or maybe I get to choose how I look, and what gender I get to be." A dawning realization showed up on her face, followed by disgust. "Oh, not another one," she said.

Uh oh. Maybe this wasn't what I thought? "Then, are you one of those conservative Christian deities here to send me off to Hell?"

She chuckled, "I'm not a demon! Do I **look** like I'd do that?" She did not. She continued,"Also, if you're not a believer in that, why are you concerned with such a thing? I mean, you could believe in basically *any* Afterlife, why would you choose one you hated?" I was confused, because what she was saying seemed different from what I expected. "So," I said, "if this isn't an isekai, and I'm not going to Hell, what's going on?"

She shook her head, "Let me finish. Let us assume you are dead, and that you're going to be reincarnated in a new world. You mind if I brutally trash any and all of your assumptions?" I sighed, "No, not at all."

"First of all, why do you want a cellphone? Any new world that I could send you to that even had cellphone reception, you'd just have a regular cellphone. I'm not a deity, just a

Reaper, so I can't make artifacts. Either it's a mundane cellphone, in which case it has no bars in a magical world, or it's some sort of magical item which is subject to all the same limits as regular magic. Anyway, would you really be happy living in a world where you had to cheat in order to make it through? I suspect this genre is popular because of slackers who want life to be handed to them."

I didn't really have an answer to that one, so I let it go. She continued, "As for powers, you realize that in a magical world, everyone else has powers too, right? Even if I made you the most powerful person around, there would still be things like a feudal system. You'd spend all your time fighting people, because ultimately, your modern sensibilities leave you unable to survive in the ancient world without substantially changing it. Ancient people with magic and survival skills like hunting, fishing, farming, and crafting would do far more good in a modern world with a few computer classes than someone from the modern period back then. You'd be too secular to understand supernatural powers, and too overspecialized to work out how most businesses are set up. You wouldn't be even make a simple item. What trade would hire you? You can't even fight properly!"

"Third, it sounds like you're transgender. I could probably do that one if you wanted," she said. I nodded vigorously. She continued, "But again, you'd find that ancient women get a rather raw deal. Do you realize that women now have the right to inherit property, something not present in society for

centuries? That they get the right to work, and in some cases are the head of their household, they have right to vote, and even to be great scientists or engineers? Yet, they instead waste their opportunities and their parents' fortunes by choosing nonsense courses like sociology or women's studies, learning about how oppressed they are instead of doing something to better themselves." I suddenly felt sheepish about my own choice of major.

"Also, do you even know what a harem is?!? The early harems were about sex slaves. The harem danced and otherwise pleasured the people who owned them. That you ignorantly use this term for more or less the same concept shows your true mindset. You want a woman to be loyal to you without question, along with three or five or whatever women, while you in turn are not at all loyal to them. That is a slave." I started getting irritated at this point, yet she continued lecturing me.

"Lastly, why do you even want to go to another world? Your world will enter an age of prosperity, but for entitled rich kids like Greta... Thornberry, was it? Kids who live with every advantage, yet blame the country that gave it to them. You live in America, right? America abolished slavery, did away with sexual inequality, and gave women the right to vote. Now, if you asked a woman on the street if she'd like to sign a paper to end women's suffrage, most of them would be dumb enough to sign it. "

At this, I finally had enough. How dare she criticize famed

environmentalist, Greta Thunberg. I said, "Hey you, ummmm, you..." She interjected, "I'm the Reaper of Free Will." I continued, "Where do you get off telling me how bad a person I am? I live in a country that may have abolished slavery, but it is still so far behind the rest of the world. America hasn't embraced globalism, environmentalism, free medicine, or anything that other countries do? They don't have the metric system. They don't have socialized medicine. Why can't I wish that I was living in another world? What's wrong with that?!?"

She sighed, "The problem with living in another world is that you are content to let your own world fail. Let me show you what I have seen." She touched my forehead, and suddenly, I saw how everyone from the Chinese to the Romans to many others had slaves. How not only were whites enslaved, from everything from galley workers to field workers to sex slaves, but blacks in Africa often enslaved other blacks. How many priests advocated for their release of slaves and for the abolition of slavery. How Europeans modeled their societies on American actions, and in turn abolished it in their own countries. How globalism by contrast created open borders that resulted in Hispanics being exploited for wage slavery, prostitution, and child abuse. How most environmentalism caused problems of its own, such as wind turbines that chopped up birds or solar panels that polluted the water with graphene. How "free" medicine created higher taxes and more dependence on government, along with more people living in slum housing. And how all of these things created

society that was less free, less happy, and less prosperous than simply acknowledging the actions of generations that had come before. "You have a choice," she said, "you can continue to hate your native land. I can send you to one with catgirls and magic, and you can see how powerless you are in such a world. Or you can learn to love the land you were born in. And I will give you what help I can."

"I think I'll try again. I'll be reborn, but I'll make another go of it in this world," I suggested. She chuckled, "Remember, I said, 'Let us assume you are dead.' You just have to wake up..." I heard her sweet voice giggling as it trailed off...

I awoke from a coma with a start. "You were out for a couple of years!" a voice to my right explained. I turned to see a blond woman with a familiar face, likely the doctor. "A couple of years? What year is it? ...Wait, what's wrong with my voice?!?" I looked felt my throat, and found no Adam's apple. Confused, I looked at my body. Where a man's chest once were, instead I saw large breasts, wide hips, and narrow waist. I noticed my hair had grown as well. She answered, "You got electrocuted in 2014. You were in a coma for nearly seven years. Since then, Trump got elected, and then Joe Biden. There's more..." Trump? The real estate agent turned reality TV show star? What was this world coming to? I heard snippets of the rest of her explanation on current events, "...So because of this, everyone has to wear a mask." I thought about what I'd felt earlier. *Such people shouldn't have the right to breathe the same air as me*, I had believed.

It was funny how easily my wish had been granted, and how little I appreciated it now. Before, I would have fully embraced the idea that we had to have government keep us safe, now I saw these things as actions of a monstrous police state. But oh, she hadn't answered my question. "Nevermind that!" I roared, "Tell me why I'm suddenly a girl!" She showed me a few pieces of paper. You see, before my unfortunate accident, I'd done more than simply muse about being the opposite sex. I had talked with a therapist and gotten consent to identify as female. It was her professional opinion that if I ever got in a disastrous accident with a long-term coma, I was okay for any surgeon to give me a sex change. Funny, I don't really remember spending all that time with a therapist or having that kind of strangely specific form being signed, but I guess I must have.

"When we operated, we found a surprise. You actually have a working vagina and ovaries. They were blocked off by your penis and testes, so they couldn't initially be seen, but once those were gone, your body was quickly able to replace its hormones. It's like someone altered reality or something to make sure that you were able to live life as a woman, and even become pregnant if you chose." She smiled as if she had told some kind of joke that went over my head.

But something wasn't right, "I wasn't electrocuted! I was hit by a truck." She explained, "You were holding some sort of pretentious coffee drink while typing on a cellphone. The truck swerved, but the coffee tipped and your cellphone

shocked you and put you into a coma. Anyway, I need to check on other patients..." I called out before she left, "Doctor?" She turned, "Yes? Anything else?"

"Thank you," I said. She smiled, "In this life, we always have choices. Remember that." To less of my shock than I should have felt, she vanished before my eyes. I didn't know what this year or the next would bring, but I made a choice. A choice to live, and to live a full life. Maybe people would tell me in the future what I could and couldn't do, but I didn't have to listen anymore.

## WELL OF SOULS

SEISHI

Hey there. It's me, Seishi. This place is the Spirit World. You see, all those religions humans worship... Well, they're not wrong, but they're not right either. It's like this. The world is a shapeless mass that can be formed into anything. As its default, it is simply a mist that life and death are in constant flux. The trees planted for instance, and any buildings placed directly in the area shift from growth to decay. After humans arrived though, they used their hearts and imagination to create these personal universes. Each island has its own ecosystem. Furthermore...

Whatever whims strike these mortals stays fixed in this realm. If this is true of creating simple objects, what does that say of the Afterlife? Anything which can be believed in, then, is likely to become a reality. Everything Heaven to Hell, to

custom notions of what will happen after death. Since we are not born, and do not die, we have no direct influence of the world of Afterlife, unlike these humans. We guide them to making their dreams real.

Yomi ends the lives of those living on Earth, while Rinne brings them here, and teaches them to build afterlives using their own will. What do I do? Well, first off, I make new souls. Well... God does, I harvest them. These souls become new children, and populate the Earth. Since Yomi also takes souls that no longer want to live out of the cycle of reincarnation, new souls are born from the Well of Souls, this thing behind me. Which leads to my second job. I guard the Well of Souls. I make sure no critters come in and try to gobble up or corrupt the spirits that are birthed from souls. You see, souls are immortal and incorruptible spheres of pure being, but spirits are the ghostly bodies that surround these souls. And finally, my job is to reincarnate the previously living who want to live again, back into life. When they are tired of their afterlives, and I give them a new life. I turn them in to children, and send them off to their next life. But.. lately, there have been problems...

On the Earth, this shows up as stillborn children, but here, the truth comes out... somehow, these spirits have been replaced with monsters, and the original souls were trapped inside. As my duty as Reaper of Birth...

Rinne

Oh c'mon, you can't really talk about duty! Your job is easy!

YOMI

You have no idea how tough it is to watch people die, or worse, to send them to death.

SEISHI

Hey, you guys, I'm trying to be serious here! Gimme a break.

BOTH

Nope!

SEISHI

Meanies... Anyway, we've gotta stop these critters.

And so, we wandered through the Afterlife, seeking answers. The land was filled with small islands, separated by seas of a sort of solid mist. The mist became white, and the nearby islands sprang into life with trees, grass, and flowers, with flowing rivers running through. The mist became black, and suddenly the waters ran dry, as did all the plant life. It was like some bipolar teenager made a painting and periodically tosses splotches of bright or dark paint on in layers. The buildings also were in a constant state of decay and restoration, one moment having serious tears to the roof or walls, and another minute in perfect shape. The only real constant here were the people, and the occasional island that was fixed a certain way.

You see, these people were spirits, and they made their reality. If they were well-adjusted, stuff they made was pretty much stable in a good way. But depressed people, things might actually be stuck in a rut instead. For instance, the man on the first island we came to had earlier tried to imagine a

grand house into being, but when I asked him later where it went off to, he told me, "The market collapsed, and I had to sell it." In truth, he had imagined the circumstances that would make the loss logical, but what really happened was that it disappeared when he lost his positivity. Humans always do this, they try to fill in the holes of their reality rather than just admit it changes with their thoughts and feelings.

The second island seemed the opposite extreme, a cute little heart-shaped island with a large tent and a girl with a reverse harem. It seemed pretty idyllic, but something about it was off. The girl seemed perfectly contented with her three guy friends, but then I looked closely at them. Suddenly, they went all reverse color monochrome. "Fades," I gasped. "Stop that," I told her, "you can't base your Afterlife on unrealistic expectations. Someone could just do something like this, and all of it would shatter in a million pieces." As I said the word 'this', I poked the three guys, dispelling the illusion. The girl sat alone, hunched over in depression. I wanted to just leave that woman to her sadness, but Rinne has always been sentimental. We stayed behind to explain to her how she needed to look for real boyfriends, that this world could only create nonliving matter realistically.

We headed to the next island, but before we could get there, some nightmares attacked the area. These were blue-black horses with glowing eyes. They charged at me, but I sidestepped. These creatures were very dangerous to the

mortal spirits, able to suck out their very hopes and dreams. But to Reapers like us? They didn't even rate as a threat. Nightmares were both spirits and physical creatures, so all of us could hurt them. My curved blade sliced across its body twice, and the nightmare was in four chunks, sliced in half twice over as I charged through it. It had no time to blink before it was in pieces, forming a puddle of blood and viscera on the floor. Yomi was far more elegant in her strike, making a single attack on many nightmares, moving on to the next one and the next. But then, that was typically all she needed, since her scythe was literally a weapon of death, while mine healed the living and hurt those of the spiritual world. Rinne's scythe was all physical, and she wasn't quite as direct as I was. Unlike spirits, all of us could hurt these things. The nightmares she attacked were instead cut in several places until they collapsed. Such carnage filled me with a disturbing thought. What if one day a Reaper went rogue? How would humans fare against such weapons?

The gore and wreckage of what we had done did not last. When the mist turned white again, the corpses were purified, and the various creations on each island were restored. The next island wasn't particularly pleasant, but the old man living on the subarctic climate apparently was happy with how things are. The island didn't change with the growth and decay cycles. A man happy with unhappiness, that was something that got me thinking about how I could be even more cheerful than I seemed on the surface.

"Hey," I asked the man, "do you know anything about these people turning to monsters?" He told me to go check out the Well of Souls on the central island. I was about to do exactly that when someone caught me attention to the south. "Is that... the little girl who turned into a monster earlier?" I asked. She apparently heard, and scolded me, "You're a bad Reaper, you are, calling me a monster!" I asked the others what was going on. Yomi explained, "I asked the Reaper of Physics for help, stopped time just before all this happened, so we could determine the source of all this." With that explained, it seemed like we were free to investigate as long as we wanted, so our first lead was the Well of Souls itself.

The Well of Souls looked like a large well, but most of it was inaccessible to creatures that couldn't fly or who didn't have a key to the well. Reapers can fly, in an awkward way, but we don't need to as we have the key anyway. You see, my scythe is the key. I jabbed the butt end of my weapon into the small hole in the door, and pathways of energy extended from the point until they lit the entire door, causing it to explode. And yes, I had to build a new door each time.

The Well of Souls is not like a regular well, there is no rope, no bucket, none of that sort of thing. Instead, it is more of an entrance to a specific area, known as Fount of Creation. This is the place where new souls get created, and where new souls create everything else. You see, a soul is part of God, a fragment of creation itself. Everything it imagines forms around it. This is why there are two bizarrely different

opinions about something political, it is not that one is the "truth" and the other is "fake news", but rather these are two different universes which each have a different set of events. Each person has a sort of Territory extending from their soul that governs how reality is. Such a power is dangerous in the wrong hands, so even if the door was busted down, there were a number of protective runes to prevent someone I didn't want from just barging in there.

Assuming they somehow broke the door down or flew over, this floor has a rock moving puzzle covering the stairs. I set to work pushing this rock north, and this one east, and that one south... only for Yomi to just concentrate really hard and use her destruction powers to shatter the rocks into soil. "Dammit, I was having fun there!" I protested. Fun was a rare thing, for we were always on one mission or another. There were no sabbaticals and no vacations, so any entertainment we could find was welcome.

The next floor was more or less an open lobby. The stairs led down, but before that, two imposing statues were in the path. Having dealt with this sort of thing as part of my job, I knew about this challenge. These statues would become animated when we drew near, forcing us to fight the creature is we wanted to pass. To my left was a behemoth statue, while to my right was a carbuncle. These were summoning effects, so the statue itself wouldn't be hurt if I defeated them, but it was a pain to have to do this battle every time I wanted to check on the Well of Souls. The carbuncle itself was a nuisance but

not a major threat. I had to keep in mind not to wield any magic against it, as it reflected spells and even our Reaper powers, but it was more of a hesitation against a creature that was almost too cute to slaughter. Rinne slashed up what amounted to a big-eared rabbit, if the rabbit had a large crimson reflective growth on its forehead and grey-green skin and fur. So much for being sentimental. Unlike the horse, it only took one small slice to put this bunny down, as the scythe was honestly bigger than it was. The blade pierced its fur, and that was that. The behemoth on the other hand, was not so easy to put down.

Behemoths are a significant challenge even for Reapers. Not a "threat" mind you, for nothing can really kill us (if we're wounded enough, we do go into dormancy though while our body recovers, so something like being impaled or trapped in an inherently deadly area can make the distinction irrelevant as long as we are stuck there, at least for awhile), but they were capable of putting up a very good fight. Yomi's destructive spells couldn't explode this thing in one shot, as its thick armored skin was made to disrupt magic of all sorts. With humans it would erase runes outright, but even with our magic which doesn't use runes, such attempts to directly affect it such as trying to explode it like those rocks before was basically a non-starter. That left conjuration and indirect magic. Yomi used her mastery of the elements to shake the ground, and give the critter a hot foot, Rinne slashed at it with her scythe, and I used protective buffs to reduce much of the damage from the beastie between its tail, teeth, and

claws. It tried to pounce on us with its massive body weight, it tried to slam against walls, and it tried to eat us. The last one might have been problematic just from being stuck inside it, but we managed to get out of the way in time. Yomi's own scythe wasn't any good, it had stubborn endurance and could shrug off death effects, so her scythe was no better than a normal one against this creature. To make matters worse, Yomi had usually relied on her scythe's instant death effect so she was the worst of the three of us at actual weapon proficiency. Her attacks were more like pinpricks while Rinne's were decent carvings gouged into its body. A long war of attrition ensued, with the behemoth stabbing and swiping at us, while we in turn countered with stabs and slashes of our own weapons.

As usual, I had to play the support role, but it was a role that I was good at. Occasionally, I used some barrier spells in an unorthodox way to press down on it. The wounds were beginning to catch up to it, and it was getting slower. It tried one last desperate charge, but this created an opening. Yomi and Rinne sidestepped while I grabbed it by the horns, their scythes swinging it unison. The blades went snicker-snack, and lopped off its head. Unfortunately, like chickens, there is a bit of residual motion. The body continued slashing, and the mouth kept trying to bite me for a full two minutes after its head was severed off, despite blood pouring from both sides. Then all of a sudden, mid-bite, the mouth went slack and the eyes rolled. It had a glassy listless look and then it was dead.

We continued down the Well, answering a statue that questioned how many victories in battle we had. Apparently, Yomi was so preoccupied with guilt over everything she had ever killed, that she could accurately account for our kills, defeats, and escapes."7204 kills, and 580 battles won. Not counting creatures that I personally have had to kill as Grim Reaper." And so we made our way to the Fount of Creation. "This is it," said Rinne, "the bottom of the Well of Souls. But I don't see anything!" I told her, "Just wait!" All of a sudden, light burst forth. It expanded from a single point, exploded in a flash until it covered the area, and then condensed back until it was a small sphere. A new soul. "The Fount of Creation," I explained for their benefit, "The most sacred place in all of Existence. This is where new souls are created. They come from here, and are sent into the Six Paths to become form spirits and mortal bodies." The soul seemed perfectly pure. There were no foul creatures within the Fount of Creation. Rinne said, "Six Paths... Now why does that sound familiar? I could swear I've heard it." I rested my palm near my face, "Don't you govern the Afterlife? Doesn't your name even mean Six Paths? How do you not know about this?" She sighed, "Gimme a break, I send most people off to the Wheel of Life, and it sorts people through the Six Paths. I haven't checked it in years! It's... probably fine!" It was probably not fine.

The Six Paths is a wheel of sorts inside a giant critter, with six distinct locations controlling the path of rebirth.

These zones, or paths, governed the wheel of samsara in the Desire Realm. I suppose the point of existence was possibly to free oneself from the Desire Realm (the part above with the Buddha pointing to the moon), but in the mean time, mortals got involved in one of five rebirths (hungry ghost, angel, demon, animal, or human), or they got stuck in Buddhist "hell" and didn't get reborn. The latter happened when people got wrapped up in various hangups and addictions.

Sure enough, the Six Paths was polluted with evil spirits as a result of the years of inactivity. But after I quickly dispensed with them with an aura of holy energy, the inside of each path was clean. Rinne blushed, "Okay, so *maybe* I've neglected it a bit. It still doesn't change the fact that this is not the source of the problem. We're looking for a big monster here!" After systematically checking every part of the Six Paths, I had to admit, "It wasn't in any of these... What now?" The areas were clean. In fact, they were so clean that a Dream Fish was able to swim by. As everyone knows, Dream Fish can only function in extremely pure worlds, well beyond what is normally possible for the Six Paths. We had done a good job, but still....

Rinne suddenly had a look of horror on her face, "Oh no..." Yomi looked confused, "What?" She hadn't any experience with the Afterlife, or anything that happpened after she sent the dying off, so I don't blame her for her ignorance. Rinne explained for me, "If it isn't something corrupting people in

the process of creation itself, and it isn't in the life on Earth through reincarnation, there's only one other place." Yomi asked, "The Afterlife?" Despite me arriving at that same answer, I had to ask, "But didn't we check there already?"

She explained, "We were looking for an outside source..." Now the two of us looked confused, so Rinne explained.

Despite Rinne's explanation, when we got back to the Afterlife, I had apparently forgotten everything. The townspeople said, "Miss Reaper, will you send us? I look forward to a new life," and I nearly fell for it. I had pulled out my scythe, ready to slash them with it to send them onward to birth, when Rinne and Yomi cried out, "No, don't!" I asked them, "Why not?!?" Rinne pointed to the group, "Take a closer look at these spirits..." And so, I did.

Normally, a spirit would have a pure light extending outward from their astral forms, connecting their soul with their spirit perfectly. However, when there is *qi deviation*, such light is blocked or distorted or even inverted into a sort of darkness. We call this being... "They're tainted!" Rinne exclaimed.

Nearby, a Ball of Flesh floated freely. I had just noticed it but immediately decided that this was an idol that possibly had corrupted them. With it gone, maybe everyone would return to normal. The Ball of Flesh resembled little more than a collage of bodies coiled in a ball. I saw overlapping hands and faces and other limbs orifices all pressed together in obscene display, generating large amounts of darkness and rolling at us to attack. The faces tried to bite us, and the entire

whole tried to crush us, but between Rinne and Yomi, we were on top of things. Yomi's scythe was able to kill sections of the Ball, but this more resembled hedging a bush than delivering a fatal blow, as each body was a connected yet ultimately distinct life. Only portions of the Ball would die each time, so it took a bit of work to cleanse the evil of the Ball.

"Whew, it's over," I sighed in relief when it was done. The others didn't share my optimism, pointing out that the group was still tainted. The Ball had been incidental, and was not the source of their corruption either. What could it be? "These spirits can't be sent on..." Yomi said. I asked, "But why?" She explained, "Don't you see? They taught each other to become evil spirits. They hid their corruption from us, in hope that we'd send them on. If they get reborn into the human world and affect others, we'd have a world like Hell!" I gasped, "No... Surely you don't mean..." She nodded, "We have to kill them all." The thought filled me with dread. Every spirit here currently in the Afterlife would have to be cut down by my scythe. The screams alone would keep me awake for years to come.

Sometimes there is some grand moral lesson to be learned, of hope and life. Sometimes lives can be saved, and people pass from this world, enriched by the experience. But sometimes, nothing can be taken from what we have to do. The scene faded to black, for I will not show such things onscreen. This was the day that we learned there aren't always easy endings.

# THE CRYSTAL

**Engaku**

Greetings.

The perceived length of chronological measures is inversely proportional to number of events in a causal chain. This is because the primary causal chain, hereafter known as "reality" is not fixed, as believed by mortals. Rather, the nature of reality is governed by perception rather than any notion of fact. This is generally not accepted truth, instead the prevailing belief is that knowledge, particularly of events, is a universal. However, when two mortals are asked to recall a sequence of events, discrepancies arise within accounts. Furthermore, it cannot be established whether one of them engages in deception, or perceives a different truth. This is further reinforced by Cartesian physics which states that reality is governed by thought...

**Chiku**

Anyway... I'm Chiku, Reaper of Nature, and this is over here Engaku, Reaper of Physics.

(I point dramatically at her before turning again to the audience)

She governs gravity, time, force, and other physics stuff. I make the sun shine, plants grow, and the weather... well, do its thing. Both of us work on the World That Is Seen. Of course, we Reapers don't do everything alone. The seven Reapers have additional Pales to help out with the individual

tasks. There are Nature, Death, Physics, Afterlife, and Birth Pales, and these help out. Unlike us, these Pales don't always have names, and some of them can be seen by the physical world. They look like animals, usually birds. For instance Yomi has crows, ravens, and other carrion birds as her Pales. I tend to use birds that drop seeds and such. I work with Engaku, though much more indirectly than Rinne, Seishi, and Yomi since I kinda sorta don't understand her at all. All of this organization, along with our magic, is part of the Unseen World. The Unseen World keeps your world running, and who keeps ours running?

(I point dramatically towards where I expect him to show up, but he proves me wrong yet again)

**Bosatsu**

That would be me.

**Engaku**

You startled me.

**Chiku**

Seriously, Bosatsu, don't pop out like that!

**Bosatsu**

I am Bosatsu, Reaper of the Unseen World. Jin and I don't have Pales. Jin doesn't because Free Will isn't something that can be planned ordered, and because her job often isn't difficult. But I don't because part of my job is creating Pales. Logically, I cannot build the framework that Pales can exist under, if Pales already exist. This would obviously be a paradox. I shall discuss the Unseen World. This world we

see, appears to be real; however, when I remove all the walls...

**God**

The complexity of the Earth with its clouds and trees and mountains falls away. Normally such manifestations cover over things, in much the same way as the moon eclipsing the sun turns everything dark. I yawn and rouse from my nap, "Bosatsu, why are you trying to wake me up?" This area is like a blank slate, a white world of emptiness but for the Reapers, my bed, and myself. I stretch, and will the bed out of existence. It is one of the perks of being God, I suppose.

Technically, "white world of emptiness" is not an accurate term. Like the blue screen technique in *Ben Hur*, this is a white screen that acts by splitting out color and refiltering it as a matte, then recombining the colors. The difference is, this is a color of pure white that can be found nowhere else in the universe, so I can seamlessly separate living things, backgrounds, time and space, and basically anything imaginable including sound effects into layers. These layers can be animated, allowing birds to chirp, the sky to turn a lush color of vanilla or some vibrant mix of red with purple. Each of these layers is so real that no lines appear as I cut and paste a shark to appear in front of them. After a few moments of demonstration, I decide to put it back where it came from. No sense getting sued for animal cruelty.

**Bosatsu**

"Sorry, God. I just needed to show the people reading this

book what was beyond the world we see. You can go back to sleep now," I say. God does my job without effort, rebuilding the framework of the physical world to paint over the fabric of this emptiness. "Tell them about the Void, too. Okay?" She sits down in midair, and a bed appears below her. Then she lies down and eventually fades into the background. She's right, of course. I need to tell you people reading about that too.

Okay, this will make very little sense, but bear with me, it's true. In the Beginning, there was Void, God, and the seven Reapers. And I think we were created from the fabric of the Void. So maybe just those two? We have been in this emptiness for awhile, and God became bored. God went to sleep, and dreamed about humans, plants, animals, and this universe you know of. And we as Reapers were assigned to oversee various aspects of it.

That's right. Existence is cyclic. You humans used your desire to exist to "create" us, with all your legends of Grim Reapers, and a physical world. And God wanted such beings as you to exist after dreaming of you. So we helped make you. When God wakes up, you humans will fade away again, and we return to being nameless beings that nobody but God acknowledges.

I shall tell a story of you humans and your nature. Bear with me, my memory isn't fresh...

Not long ago... in fact, you humans would call it the future, though in fact it affects the past... someone decided to go for

a mining expedition against her friend's wishes. The friend you may know as the bounty hunter Sera. The other was a dwarf named Phim. Phim had just left Sera, searching for some gold. What he found instead changed a great deal of things.

**Phim**

Sera and me, we go way back. We did everything together. When she wanted to dress like a boy, and be a bounty hunter, I joined up right along with her. We got to be one of the best groups, well until those lot sealed up that big critter. Those people. We met them in that forest, when they stole our kill, some big giant wolfie named Fenrir. And they got in our way ever since. We did team up with them after all that, but that story comes after this one. This is kind of the story of how I ditched Sera for awhile, so I could go off seeking some loot. Sera wanted to stay and guard some creepy castle. I told her that was a boring waste of time, she called me a damned fool dwarf who would probly die in a cave-in, and she was sorry we ever worked together. Don't worry, we made up later.

I bashed at the rock walls of the cave for awhile, and pretty soon, I did find a treasure. But it wasn't gold, and I really wanted gold. In fact, I stared at the crystal, and thought *I really want gold* and some dropped from the air. I kinda had to move out of the way right quick, cuz it almost smushed me. So then I couldn't help it, I thought about how I needed a few people to help haul this huge crystal and all this gold away. I'd find some excuse to keep most of the gold, they

could have that crystal.

Just then, a bunch of people showed up. If I didn't know better, I'd say this crystal granted wishes. But I knew better. There had been sheets of paper requesting help for a gold dig, and that's how I got interested. This must be the power of advertising! Listen children, you can't rely on magic gems or rings or cellphones to do things for you, you need to work hard. And remember, you need to get out there and update that rolodex!

In any case, these shiftless people seemed to believe in such foolishness, because as soon as they got here, they didn't help lift the crystal, or even try to take my gold. They stood around at wished for damned-fool things like "whirled peas" and "hax0rs pl0x" and "make me into a pretty pretty princess." All the while, that crystal started glowing and making creepy sounds. It turned from a nice clear color to a deep red, and I thought I heard some Latin chanting in the background. It was all very scary, and then one of these guys asked the crystal to help him commmit suicide. I'm not sure if it was the crystal talking, or if things just went south, but I was outta here. I loaded up as much gold as I could tote, and tried to move it toward the surface when I saw her.

### Engaku

My amaranth hair and eyes, my tall frame, and my deadpan visage unnerved the middle-aged dwarf. He appeared to debate whether to attack me, but fear gave way to admiration as the man stood gawking. As a Reaper, it was seldom that

we achieved bodily manifestation on the physical dimension, but I needed to make myself known to these individuals. "Greetings," I announced myself to these mortals, "it appears you have discovered the Crystal of Human Existence, and have abused its powers." The dwarf known as Phim queried, "What is this thing, and why is it granting wishes?" It was refreshing to see that this one had overcome his denial. I explained, in full awareness that my ability to create plain terminology was decidedly limited, "This is the condensed form of the Atman, the collective soul of humanity. All memory, reason, and ambition has been converted into this cosmic keystone. Fear not. Your friend's wish to suicide himself was not validated. I took the liberty of halting the movement of time, and making a wish to prevent this wish." The dwarf shook his head, "He's not my friend. I don't even know him! What do I care if he wants to kill himself? Anyway, are you here for a wish? Come to make yourself a human?" I ignored his implication that I was in some say abnormal, but I realized making a wish might be in fact what was needed here. "Very well," I said, "I wish for this Crystal to shatter into as many pieces as there are humans, and be embedded inside the souls of living things." As I said this, I slashed through the Crystal with my scythe. The Crystal normally indestructible since it was made from souls, granted my wish and allowed itself to be carved into tiny shards. The unique trait of my scythe is its temporal distortion effect. As I sliced through the Crystal, these shards flew backward and forward in time, placing them outside of time. And so, while

this happened in the future, it affected people well into the distant past. And so it was that all of you humans have a crystal of existence deep within your soul governing personal reality.

But the story doesn't end here. Since the Crystal shattering was an eternal event reaching even to the original Earth's history, people discovered these shards occasionally before I pulverized it. One such man was a wizard named Tolkien. Entirely by accident, you understand, he got access to the Sword of Sorrow that should be sole property of Yomi. Using it, he extracted souls from humans, elves, and other living creatures. Of course, doing this meant these beings died. But this wasn't apparently a concern, as he planned to use the completed Crystal to revive them. I know all of this from reading his logbooks in an underground bunker filled with traps that did absolutely nothing to the likes of me. He had sent golems every night to kidnap people in order to perform his experiments, but somehow he had never thought through the fact that in order to grant such a wish, he needed a complete Crystal. Now the shards of crystals were redivided with every new soul, so as long as her removed all crystals from everyone living (no need for grave-robbery), his plan would succeed. But the obvious flaw in his plan was that in order to have the Crystal intact, he needed to give up his own crystal shard. For such a brilliant researcher, he was only human after all, and prone to arrogance and half-baked plans. I knew that as his plan continued, the human race and many others would become extinct, leaving only plants, low-

order animals, fungi, and the bacteria. While it was tempting to see life without humanoids, the rosy picture that population control types see isn't reality. And so, it was up to me to stop him.

Now, thwarting a Reaper is significantly more impossible than stopping any of the mortal races, but he did admirably for a human. There were the aforementioned golems, which I cut down and removed from existence. He sent tanks and aircrafts to stop me. There were warriors and assassins. I made a promise to myself to remain aloof from the affairs of humanoids, so I wasn't about to attack innocent lives with my scythe. I sidestepped their attacks, or in some cases just shrugged off their damage. No mortal weapons could hurt me, and even weapons of the spiritual world could only wound, not kill. But passing out from blood loss was nothing to sneeze at. When the constructs and assassins failed, he went after me himself, using all the magic he had at his disposal. But I had magic too, of a sort that didn't use runes, and I blocked and countered his spells with ease. I was about to arrest him, trapping him in some kind of temporal effect (perhaps GR0L|1\1D1-10G variant loop might be most suitable) when he sidestepped and slashed at me like a maniac. He told me all of his plans that I had already read in depth from his copious logs, monologuing for a good half-hour. Meanwhile, I was having to get out of his way, since every lucky hit that he landed made me bleed my own blood. "Why! Won't You! Die!!!" he screamed at me, punctuating each slash. I realized that if I wanted to prevent this from

coming to pass, I needed to be a bit more drastic. And so, I went back in time. It was not my place to end lives, so I brought Yomi along.

"I don't feel good about this," said she. "For the sake of the future, we must," I assured her. She told me that it was my mess, and that I should clean it up, even though I would clearly be overstepping my duties in that case. After some heated and rather colorful conversation, she agreed to kill Tolkien before he could mess with the crystal shards and despite the fact that this would also undo much of the fantasy genre including this account. You see, besides being a powerful wizard, Tolkien was actually that Tolkien. John Ronald Reuel Tolkien. But she didn't agree to any abortions, so her plan required that either Mabel Suffield or Arthur Reuel Tolkien be assassinated. It was bad enough that the likes of *The Hobbit* be snuffed from history, but Arthur was also manager of the Bloemfontein branch of the Bank of Africa. Since Mabel was to die at age 34 of diabetes without any help, it was decided that she would be the one to die. Since we couldn't hire humans to do our work, conjuring explosions was too prone to collateral damage, and anything too violent might shock Arthur, it was decided to kill her quietly with poisoned tea like any good English person should prefer to die. But Mabel was a student of botany, and refused to drink any herbs that she knew would hurt her. Finally, Yomi had to be sent back to just before became engaged to Arthur to kill her in her sleep. It was still tragic, but far less of an impact than it could have been. Terence

Hanbury White instead became credited for the fantasy genre movement.

As Reapers, we regularly have to make decisions that affect the course of history. But it was imperative that souls stay as they are. Perhaps one day, we will have a version of existence and reality without sacrificing humans and elves and the like. And yes, I do not know how JRR Tolkien managed to acquire tanks and aircrafts. Or why he was doing this rather than writing his novels. We must not discuss this too closely.

## CAFE

### God

I have a dual existence as God and as Ambrosia. When God sleeps, I'm awake and vice versa. But now that I have become God, I do have His powers. But being God isn't quite what you'd think. I'm sure alot of people would say "Oh yeah, the first thing I'd do as God is flood a few places. And then I'd smite this person and that one..." Or they'd act like Miss America contestants and say they just want world peace. Great, you've lobotomized the population. Human beings are only peaceful or happy when they are brain-dead.

I don't go around throwing around powers. In fact, aside from immortality, most of my powers I don't use on a daily basis. As God, I have standing orders for a number of subcontracted entities to do most of my work, mainly becoming involved when the job needs a personal touch. Any of my angels can do healing, and the Reapers do a damned good job managing

birth, death, physical laws, stuff like that. As Ambrosia, most of my time is spent with Nevras. We still go on dates. But while I can be happy with him, I can't be happy doing nothing. And so, I took the only real job suitable for someone who is God, listening to people's problems.

No, I'm not a priest. I'd work at a bar, but I personally have no interest in alcohol. So I became a barista at one of those coffee bookshops, deciding to send myself and my dear hubby back to Earth's past. We got here in about the 1940s, and made it through without getting bombed or invaded by the Nazis. The store has been around awhile. We sell all the books too long to read in one sitting, *War and Peace*, *Oracle of Tao*, *Journey to the West*, *Venmurasu, A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight, Dream of the Red Chamber, Water Margin, The Legend of the Condor Heroes, Atlas Shrugged, Lord of the Rings,* stuff like that.

As far as the land goes, I own it outright with no property tax involved ever. I said, "**I'd like to make a coffee shop with books to read**," and it was so. The land grew up into a forest glade, roads joined into a shopping district surrounded by trees and wildlife, and when the government said they'd like to tax the land, I said, "**No thanks**." I don't go around ruling governments, but if I say no to something, they have to do it that way. I was given a tax break indefinitely, and somehow extra property taxes appeared for them in the form of a shopping mall six miles away. A city grew outward from there, staying mercifully away from developing in these

woodlands, yet connecting closely enough to them that we got regular business every day.

I sell pretty much any drink, in addition to a number of scones, and some cute heart shaped pocket pies with everything from meat to baked apples inside. We use wholesome ingredients, they're locally sourced, and they're fresh, but they're not exactly grown in the ground. You see, in actual fact, I'm pretty average cook. Maybe below average considering how often Tamashii griped about meals I made. The cafe section of the shop has no items on display, only pictures of items. I tell customers that it saves cost not having to store everything exposed to air. But the truth is, while I do make coffee, tea, and hot cocoa, I don't actually have a kitchen in the back room. Instead, there's a table, a chair, some plates, and my imagination. I say, "**Let there be a scone, with little nuts, and a couple of chopped up rose petals on top for decoration**." And it is so. Out comes a hot baked scone exactly to customer specifications.

"I never get tired of watching you do that," says Nevras. As a former prince of the kingdom of Phoenix, he runs the cash register and a remarkable number of business planning decisions are made by him. Not that we need money. Both of us are immortal, and thus don't need anything to eat or drink ever. This cuts down on a huge amount of expenses, as does having the property tax free. But to make things look legitimate, we typically abide to good business models and avoid being in the red. Any money we can spare typically

goes to churches and temples. And any time we have is spent with each other, either out on dates or making sweet sweet loving to each other, or in some cases just sitting in and snuggling while watching a movie. This era doesn't have Netflix yet, but being God, making it happen anyway has never been a big deal. We are perfectly fine to just "Netflix and chill" while eating popcorn or the like. Yes, we can eat, we just don't have to. I smile at him, "Shush you. Are you okay to work today, or should I hire the assistant?"

Sylvia is our assistant. She is a part-time worker at the register for when Nevras and I just want to goof off. She has a perky face, strawberry blond hair tied back in a ponytail, and a nice figure that both Nevras and I admire. She is also not, strictly speaking, real. She knows deep down that this is so, but she has a pretty full backstory written for her, and so she's reasonably happy with this arrangement. She tells people that she was raised by a single mother, that she worked hard to get through a nice private school, and that she trained for years in business and economics classes, and decided what she really wanted was a quiet job. She's happy with this story. What she's not happy with is that after work, she basically disappears again. But while creating nourishing food is easy for me, creating false life is a bit like maintaining a lie. It can only go for so long before becoming exhausting. She doesn't get to go to parties or do any hobbies, unless I clear the weekend to sleep. Nevras shakes his head, "Nah, it's okay. Save her for when we're really booked."

We go back outside. There are about three or four customers out there. One of them is a brunette girl in glasses and a miniskirt reading *Gravity's Rainbow*. I know that she just likes to read, and has been banned from the library for speaking out against their excluding blacks. It is the 1960s now and there are still Jim Crow laws. So I let her read. The book she is reading doesn't technically exist yet.

Another customer is a homeless man who I typically turn away during business hours. The poor are always with us, as they say, and I don't want people to be mooches. I don't want them starve either though. I'm considering hiring him on as a room and board worker, since he mainly doesn't care about anything other than being fed. In this cafe, such things as political sides do not exist. I am neither conservative nor liberal, though I refuse to let the idea of equal rights be corrupted by those who would use it for totalitarianism. So I hire him, on the spot. I make it clear that he can't go around begging, but I want him to eat, so if he comes to work for me he will always be fed. I pay him a bonus occasionally when business is good. I could print money myself, but even I can't overturn the laws of inflation. Even perfectly real money (as much as money is real) will still devalue currency. He is black, so he is not allowed to be hired in many places. He cannot afford a home, hence he is homeless. One day soon, all blacks are allowed to be hired, but the people will bemoan perceived "microaggressions" while they allow real racists to try to take away their rights. These same racists claim to help minorities, but taxes go to each handout, solving nothing

about the housing problem.

If anyone wants to come and give me any trouble for hiring blacks, they will find it extremely hard to do. You see, inside our window, facing the customers is a sign that reads, "**No troublemakers will be allowed inside this establishment**." Anyone who tries to open our doors with malicious intent will find them locked, while other customers can enter freely. And no, the trick of following someone who opened the door doesn't work, for a strong wind will force them outside. Anyone who throws rocks at our glass will find themselves knocked out by the very brick they've thrown. This man is safe here, and I have prepared a guest room for him to stay as long as he wishes.

Still another young woman is struggling with an unwanted pregnancy. I help her deliver a healthy child well before term, and then give her the number of an adoption clinic. No, I am not in favor of abortion. The right to choose never allows the right to choose to end a child's life. It is only the right to choose not to have sex in the first place.

Years pass. The homeless man has retired with a nice pension. The girl who was reading books before still reads books. And the woman who was headed to the adoption clinic decided to keep the child, who is now an adult. She too is a loyal patron. The world outside us has changed. Libraries are now desegregated, as are all establishments. Men and women can work. Still other changes came. I supported the idea of equal rights for all, but opposed all these black studies

and women's studies. Generations to come will learn about how they are oppressed, a sure way to create self-fulfilling prophecy, and not how to be happy and work hard for your dreams. Sylvia is once again our worker, though I have made her look older. Soon I will have to change her name and appearance. Nobody asks why Nevras or I never age. Most of them either came only as adults, or have figured out the truth of who we are.

I have bought the shopping district, inflation be damned. It updates with the era but there were three restaurants, a temple, and an inn. While the rest of the world is only barely getting past burgers and fries or maybe Italian food, the idea my daughter Tamashii had was to have foods from all around the world. But we couldn't exactly import random people from all over the world as their languages and cultures are so much of an adjustment, so I just decided to instantly teach locals entire cultural menus. So, there is a European restaurant, Asian restaurant, and African restaurant. Unlike most such restaurants, they have pretty much every culture's dish on each continent. I occasionally serve churros as well.

More years pass. We have new customers. Some of these have pink or purple hair, others have mohawks or tattoos. This generation seems to be getting more free in terms of their physical expression, but I see its future. While society is becoming more and more equal now, their leaders are control-freaks, and actively trying to become dictators. We see the beginnings of it, these mass shootings used as a

pretext for gun confiscation. Not that I care for guns, but I remember that Hitler and Stalin took weapons before they took over. Meanwhile, shopping districts like mine around the country are having increasingly shorter lifespans. The space wasted on urban sprawl is a problem, as is the congestion of cities. My small district has stayed the same only because it is not technically part of this world. When developers look at this area to cut down trees and build high rises, they suddenly forget what they were doing and head to a different area instead. I see the increased isolation of society, until at last things reach their limit. The three restaurants have changed. These are not run by people who know me anymore, only people who pretend to. The Asian restaurant became a fusion restaurant, with muddied and Americanized dishes. The Asian restaurant is now Indonesian. The African restaurant became a soul food place where "persons of color" congregate, and the nearby temple is now a mosque. The staff of each of these is imported from around the world, but it is like the Tower of Babel in each. Food barely gets cooked on time, because cooking directions need to be translated from English to Spanish to other languages, and much of the directions are lost in translation. The places are not allowed to be owned by local workers because of claims of cultural appropriation. But all these cultures don't get along. And so, these businesses are sold. The people who own them wind up broke and on the streets, eventually moving to cities to find work.

More years pass. Even though everyone is welcome, from

male to female to intersex or crossdressers or transgender people, from blacks and whites to many other racial groups, increasingly it is becoming difficult for people to enter because of the no troublemakers rule. There is violence everywhere outside the shop. The people are glued to their handhelds, not looking up at one another. The state is exploiting this antisocial distance to further divide and conquer. A number of new laws for businesses are going into place, and people are not going outside much at all anymore. We refused to abide by these laws, but our business might as well be closed. They said these measures would be in place just a few weeks, but it's already been two years. And the fighting between people continues.

Centuries pass. The state took over, and turned the entire world into ten nations. Ostensibly, the world is at peace, and everything looks natural and green. But actually, there are a number of absolutist city states, and the population is capped at around 500 million. There is heavy population control, most religions are banned, and the state has absolute control on the lives of others. We still live in our coffee shop, but now it is hidden from the world. Our role now is to provide sanctuary for those who understand the truth, that violence and evil have taken over.

Millennia pass. The Earth is made anew (which might possibly have something to do with my intervention, but let's not take too much credit), and we have reopened our coffee shop to the public. The world is made up of people who

remember how bad things got, and the state is carefully restricted by a Council determined to limiting the power of cities and governments. But never mind that. Today, is a very important day. I have a very important customer. Myself.

AMBROSIA

"I still don't see why you brought me here," I say. Nevras pulls me inside anyway. "Relax," he says, "the food is great, and there are African, Asian, and European restaurants nearby. It's a regular slice of the old Earth here." I argue, "How did you find this place anyway? I mean, we had to walk to the middle of nowhere, through some swamps and thickets. Couldn't you have gone to another town?"

He shakes his head, "This lady makes the best coffee ever. It's like your coffee, only if you'd had thousands of years to perfect the art. And her churros are to die for! And it seems like everyone who attends her cafe gets helped out in a major way." I scowl at him, "Didn't you say you'd only been here once and that was when you were a child? A lot can change over the years. This lady is probably old by know and no longer remembers how to cook." I enter the story with Nevras and start screaming. Tamashii follows behind, saying, "What are you two carrying on about, have you even ordered something for me... Aaaaaaaah!!!" For she sees that this cafe has mirror images of her parents working at the counter. The employee and the owner seem unfazed by all this screaming. They ask, "What can I get you?" After we recover our composure, I order a scone with little nuts and a couple of

chopped up rose petals on top for decoration. Something about that order seems right. Nevras orders a garden salad and some tea. Tamashii orders a slice of pizza with anchovies and a strawberry milkshake. The barista slices fresh strawberries to put on top. A memory comes to me of when Tamashii asked me to do this, and this cafe becomes surreal. We thank them and leave. "Have a nice day!" the barista calls out.

Rinne

It's funny. We watch these humans every day, sitting down to some coffee. We watch as their days where they try to pretend to be as busy as us (as if such a thing were possible, when we get sent to virtually every time or place), and derive tremendous joy from sitting down to a nice warm beverage. But for us, there is no rest, for we are always on our mission... "Hey there, Rinne!" a voice calls out. It is Ambrosia, known in our circles as God, though she uses her powers in a far less grand way than most religions will let people know. Technically, like us, God can be everywhere or any person, but she is also incredibly laid back and friendly. Like a barista. "Ummm... uhhh, hi there," I stutter a bit. We are very powerful, but He (God likes people to call her a Him) existed first. "You guys look like you need a break today," she says with a knowing glance. While we do our missions forward and backward in time, and sometimes even outside of it, this day we had to exterminate everyone in the Afterlife, as they had corrupted into evil spirits. She isn't kidding. Yomi, Seishi and I all nod. "So?" she asks, "What

will you have?" The other customers will not notice this. We are not just invisible, but people who aren't dying or spiritually sensitive don't even notice we've been here.

I order a simple cappuccino. She doesn't even do anything special for me. I don't want any cool tricks, just to have a break. "I'll have a Kopi luwak, fresh," Seishi says while all of us groan. A group of wild civet manifests, probably summoned from back when they were kept in cages, and defecates on a plate. After they run off in freedom, Ambrosia washes the beans, then plops the result in a coffee filter and boils it up. Then Yomi orders, "I'll have a green tea with some milk art. You can make it happen right?" Ambrosia (not the one who left) explains, "I can make it work without doing anything special. Though art isn't my strong suit." She isn't kidding. Normally, the milk must be steamed in order to do art, because the sugars and such need to denature. But she poured cold milk, and it cooperated with her. But yea, she was barely managing a simple leaf pattern. We set and drink while watching the sun rise. We look as children and animals (including those civets) walk through the area, sipping slowly. Then it's back to work. A portal opens up, and we head to Bosatsu to receive our next assignment.

## WORLD RENOUNCER

### Seishi

I don't normally work with Jin and Bosatsu, except for one sort of circumstance. A prophetic birth. We have been taken to Earth's past to give a prophecy to this expecting mother

and her husband. This is not my first rodeo. I helped this lady named Mary bear this one child at one time. But maybe we'll talk about that later. When there's a prophetic birth there is an entirely different set of circumstances from a normal birth, so I have a different team. You see, the wheel of samsara that shares its name with Rinne involves death, afterlife, and birth. But a prophetic birth is different. The soul has no reincarnations, it is born once for a purpose.

Bosatsu sets up the circumstances, as ordained by God. I gave the body a new soul from the Well of Souls. And Jin... well, it's hard to explain. You see, all prophecies are a choice. Even if the prophet who receives it receives an unambiguous prophecy, they have a choice to tell it clearly or lie about it, those in the family have a choice, and if possible the target of the prophecy has a choice. But... the choice isn't as clear-cut as it appears. A man named Oedipus tried to run from the prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother. He would have been better off if he had simply ignored it, but instead he ran away from his adopted parents (who gave him up when they heard the prophecy) and straight toward his real parents. While Jin offers free will through prophecies, some of the choices offered are self-fulfilling. Ironically, knowing the future is perfect freedom and perfect slavery. Perfect slavery, because it often paralyzes one with the realization of a horrible future. But provided one thoroughly researches things, it brings tremendous peace and freedom.

Let me be clear about one thing. We're not angels. In the case

of Mary, we didn't deliver her prophecy. It went through a series of angelic intermediaries, starting from God, then the angel of God, then an archangel named Gabriel. We didn't say a thing to her. Jin set up the laws of probability allowing the event to be equally possible and impossible. Bosatsu enabled the framework that facilitated this process. And I was there to ensure the pregnancy went smoothly and the child was born. That was true for Mary and Jesus. This was the Buddha, and had its own complications.

This birth itself was fairly normal, but the prophecy surrounding it was not. "Your child will either rule the entire world, or renounce it," the messenger had said. Now many people would jump at the chance of finding out that their child was going to be a holy man. Well, in theory, they might not like the whole idea of refusing to eat certain meats or vegetables because it's unclean or the fact that ultimately the child wasn't really theirs but belonged to their faith. But this was India during the height of its caste system, and this family wanted their child to be exactly that, a leader who would conquer the world. However, things have a way of not going like you'd expect...

**Jin**

Free will is a funny thing. The average person expects that events once predicted, automatically come to pass. But I'm an old hand at this. I knew that if they had simply ignored the prophecy, and raised their child normally, it would never have come to pass. But this boy, Siddharta, was blessed or

cursed to have a father with impossibly high expectations for him. Not only were they high, but they were rather lacking in the aspect of choice.

But as I say, I know my job. What better way to make a child who makes clear choices than to stifle him from day one? And so, his father, King Suddhodana did his best to distract him from deep contemplation. He gave him the finest wine, women, and surrounded him with parties. He kept him insulated from sickness, death, and old age. Which is of course easier said than done. Whenever someone got so much as a cold, seemed old or ready to die, they were dismissed from the residence. Of course, we helped. We literally kept some of the attendants from showing their age, because after all, they had to earn a living.

As Siddharta grew, he was kinder than other children. He was more thoughtful and seemed to be more reserved. King Suddhodana's bloodlust for war wasn't shared by his child. Religious history tells you what happened next, that he snuck out of this pleasure palace, that he saw old age, a sick man, a dead person, and finally a monk. That he studied under the Sikhs, and while his life before had been too soft, this ascetic life was too hard. How Buddha cultivated a "middle way," meditating under a tree and dealing with various temptations, and finally teaching others before he died.

But perhaps the most important story is never told. How was he able to sneak out of the palace so easily? How indeed.

**SUDDHODANA**

Among men, I was a king. It was my great ambition for my son to see him become a man one day and overtake the world. That was the prophecy the wise man predicted, and I would do anything to prevent that *other* prophecy from coming to pass. I gave him luxuries, friends, and all the enjoyment that he could possibly stand if he would only stay near us and not wander out into the world.

I wanted him to be a leader of men, a great hero, a conqueror. But more than anything, I wanted to keep my son. I am no heartless bastard, though yes, I am a member of the Kshatriya caste, and it was my destiny to kill people for a living in pursuit of rule. And no, I didn't find it ironic that the Brahmin priest caste was higher than us, the rulers. So no, I didn't see my son Siddharta as moving up in caste, but rather that I was loving a son. I had lost a wife not long after he was born, and I couldn't bear the thought of losing him too. I am not a brute. Well, not as much as people imagine.

The plan worked for a time. But I watched Siddharta as he grew. He was kind to people, and as least as kind to animals. He saved a snake from torment. He was gentle to his horse, and to the birds of the sky. And when his cousin Prince Devadatta shot a swan with his bow and arrow, he took the swan and nursed it back to health before releasing it. I saw how happy and decent my child was, and how he was too good for this violent life that I was to give him. So I wished to keep him happy, I wanted him to be safe. It was safer indoors, after all. So I built him a palace and filled it only

with the young and healthy, and I gave him his cousin Princess Yasodhara so that he would not need to venture outside the home to marry.  And yet, rather than becoming happy, I saw it. The light in his eyes slowly flickered and died. He became depressed at the state of life, he became restless and wanted to see other people. I couldn't understand it. He had everything he needed, so why did he still wish to leave?

And so, I made a choice. I fired the guards in his palace, telling him that they were on vacation. With them gone, Siddharta felt emboldened to sneak away at times, and each time he did, I hired people to come to the palace grounds. There was no sense in him wandering too far, after all. I did it knowing that I would lose him, but I couldn't stop seeing that haunted look on his face as I had stolen away his happiness through pleasure.

To find the first two was easy. I rounded up an old man from a part of town where most of older men and women lived, and I found the sick man with the other lepers. I was careful not to get too close, but I paid him a nice sum to hang around near the gates. People kept trying to get rid of him, as after all, sick people are shunned and frowned upon. But he had received his payment, and was a persistent man. As for the last, I kinda sorta had to have my attendants carry out an assassination. What? Don't look at me that way! For my son, no gift is too great.

In any case, this was enough. Siddharta was greatly disturbed

by what he saw, and perhaps more disturbed by the fact that it was close enough to his home that he suspected I was responsible. He ignored the dancing girls, and I knew my plan was working. Not long after, he ventured out on his own, leaving his wife and child behind. I watched from a window as he took one last look at his home. I waved to him and smiled, though I doubt he saw me. My boy had grown up.

# VIRGIN BIRTH

**Bosatsu**

It isn't often that an event comes that surprises even me. Lunar eclipses and solar eclipses are common enough that I yawn every time I am asked to do them, even though lately all these religious nutters get all hyped about the moon turning to blood. Seriously?

The moon turns to blood every time there's a lunar eclipse. Now, if the sun goes dark and the moon goes red on the same day, well, that's something to talk about. But that only happened once, and it was on a certain day of Passover. The day the Savior was killed.  To say nothing most of those other prophecies about end times being false. But the one about the sun and moon? All of that happened the day he died.

As Reaper of the Unseen World, I have three duties: maintain the Unseen World, give other Reapers tasks, and occasionally, to carry out great tasks. The first and second are relatively routine compared to the last, as you might imagine.

Yet they are of no less importance. For without the Unseen World, magic would not exist, the Reapers would have no place to go when not appointed to tasks, and the underpinnings of this world you mortals call real would quickly fall apart. Nor would it be fair to say that the second duty is not important. While it seems like the Pales can do the job for the Reapers, given how many of them there are, that's a bit of an oversimplification. Each of these Reapers is very much not human, and yet very very human. For example, Yomi does her job better than any Pales could, and she does it flawlessly and efficiently. And yet, she routinely gets depressed about the idea of causing death to others. If not for both giving her tasks, and assigning her mental health days and vacation time, she would quickly become a nervous wreck. And so it is with each of these. Seishi tries too hard to lighten the mood, and is herself at risk if ever her efforts go in vain. These Reapers cannot die, but this just makes things for worse. For you see, they still have pain.

But never mind all that, it is the last task we are focused on here. I send wars and famines, meteor showers, tidal waves, and great destruction. But I also set up prosperity, great harvests, and events of great joy.  I won't boast though, these are not my plans.  I too have someone to answer to. God, of course.  As powerful as I am, my power is dwarfed by God. Or as she calls herself, Ambrosia. These days, she spends the bulk of her time hanging out with family and sleeping, but when this universe began, we got to watch her work. Every now and then, she creates a planet or life form, and she

merely says a few words and that's it. I suppose you could compare it to a dentist's office. The nurse scrapes at the teeth, uses the toothpaste, gets them to spit, and takes the x-ray. The main doctor does their job seemingly effortlessly, double-checking the work of the nurse, talking to the patient, and founding the dentist's office in the first place. Her job, if you can call it that, is far more interested in the personal aspects of existence, but if she wanted to, she could do all of our jobs.

But it is today we are concerned about. Today, Ambrosia handed me a series of papers. "What is this?" I asked. She explained, "This is prophecy. Specifically, real prophecy, that I intend to make come true." I was shocked. Human beings, unlike our dear Reaper of Physics, Engaku, have basically no ability to see time. So their prophecies are a joke. A man who called himself John wrote a number of false prophecies to rationalize to himself why the Temple was destroyed, predicting that at some future time there would be brutal destruction, instead of just admitting the obvious. The Temple was only provided as long as God's chosen kept the covenant. Since they gave his Son to be executed, naturally the Temple was done away with.

Another named Nostradamus gave over six thousand prophecies, but only five or ten could even vaguely be read as true. And most had such vague language that you could claim it was true even if it wasn't. "*Before the war comes, The great wall will fall, The King will be executed, his death*

*coming too soon will be lamented. (The guards) will swim in blood, Near the River Seine the soil will be bloodied,"* in reference to the French Revolution. But most of what he wrote were assorted visions, swimming images of events that the man himself didn't understand. "*They will think they have seen the Sun at night, When they will see the half-pig half-man: Noise, song, battle, fighting in the sky perceived, And one will hear brute beasts talking.*" Was this a reference to fighter pilots and their masks? "*Few young people: half-dead to give a start*." Well, I suppose it could refer to the whole masking up thing, and how people weren't really living. Or it could refer to actual brain-eating zombies.

In contrast, when Engaku passed along predictions to people in dreams, they were clear and unambiguous. "*In five days, if you do not prevent this, a man named Victor S Alexander will start a war with Hungary. You must go to the tallest tower in your town at 9pm, and fire a weapon on a man wearing a green shirt and a blue hat. Factor for 5 mph winds, and be sure to use a pistol.*" Humans can't make prophecies like these. So the idea that humans made over 300 prophecies about a single man, and God intended to fulfill all of them was just unbelievable!

I looked through these, and became concerned. Somehow this man was to be born of a virgin, die on a cross, be a sacrificial lamb like that intended when Abraham was ordered to kill Isaac, be a mediator between God and mankind, and numerous other predictions. "Uhhhh, God, how

am I supposed to do all this?" Ambrosia sighed, as though she thought I had failed her terribly by not being able to guess her thoughts, then manifested a complicated schematic. "You want to do *what*?!?"

The next few days were intense. God introduced me to his Son, who outside a human body didn't even look male, much less like God the "father." The both of them were shapeshifters and could take literally any form, but God preferred the form of Ambrosia due to her marriage (in the future) with Nevras. Meanwhile, Jesus didn't appear to care how he looked, now taking the form of a preteen of indeterminate gender. I had met Jesus over the years, but this was usually when we visited the Earth after he was born, or after he died. Unlike humans, with their crazy notion that Jesus was no longer on Earth and would visit again only in these so-called end times (yes, the same ones they predicted with the moon turning to blood), we saw Jesus in every era. But I had never seen Him like this, before becoming human and revealing himself to the Earth. It was quite a different look. And no, like us, Jesus wasn't fixed to linear time. After Jesus died on the cross, Jesus appeared to Jacob and wrestled with him. He appeared to people earlier and later in time, including the Egyptians as Akhnaten, and the writers of Proverbs as Lady Wisdom. But here was Jesus in the spirit only, not in the flesh. Jesus had a wispy unfixed form, much like a ghost. And Jesus said, "Touch me and take me in your arms."

I did so, giving Jesus a big hug, only to suddenly find that I was cradling a *hitodama* instead. "Go to the woman named Mary, and put my spirit inside her womb," the ball of spiritual energy said. It was after she had met the angel Gabriel and agreed to this plan. I went with Seishii and Engaku, the latter of which was busy tabulating variables to produce an astronomical event she called the Star of Bethlehem. Apparently, it was not a new star at all, but several heavenly bodies lining up. We had to be quick, because if anything was done wrong, the child would not be born. In a world where surnames weren't a common occurrence, three Reapers had to find the right Mary. Thankfully, there was the trail of an angel, so it was really just a matter of finding a woman that still had that glow to her.

We managed that, so it was up to us to start the process. I called the Holy Spirit to this area, and immediately there was a feeling like rushing wind surrounding the woman. Mary's hair was starting to get mussed up as she moaned and made certain sounds that I won't repeat, not the least of these was calling out, "Oh, God..." The Spirit overshadowed her, and I placed the soul of Jesus inside her. Next, Seishi pressed on her stomach, and a faint rune glowed on her stomach. It flickered out briefly, before exploding into light covering the room. Jesus, inside of her, took this life energy and the power of the Holy Spirit, and formed a rapidly developing embryo. As for Engaku, she appeared to finally finish her calculations, and this cosmic event formed directly where she was going to

be when Jesus was born. As shocking as all these events were, they were beyond the sight of mortals, so while Mary saw everything because it was happening to her, if someone were looking at the house, the only light they might see was a candle sitting nearby.

As to the pregnancy over the next few months, it was a parthenogenesis. A type of pregnancy that happened a lot in certain animals, but not much at all in humans. Mary made a child with what was already present inside of her. This child by genetics should have been female, but due to Jesus's own decision, would grow up an XX male. Artists would depict him as a long-haired male for centuries to come.

Of course, it wasn't done. Jin convinced a Roman emperor that it was in his best interest to write a tax that included all of his territory, including Israel. Herod was convinced that this child was a threat to him, so the family had to move to Egypt. Shepherds nearby were in the fields when they found out about this child.

And then there were the wise men. Sometimes this is translated as "kings" but they were religious people, each from different countries, each whose religion had predicted a Savior of sorts. One of these was a Zoroastrian, whose religion frequently looks for spiritual leaders. Another was a Buddhist, a religion who would later search for Dalai Lama candidates and which had a tradition of Miroku, the new Buddha who would teach pure dharma. In fact, the story of the Prodigal Son is in Buddhist texts. And lastly, there was

Taoism, a religious guide to living according to nature that was called The Way. Each of these added teachings to the boy, each gave him a physical gift to match the nature of their religion. Gold is common in Buddhism, with many of the Buddha statues painted thusly to represent immortality or perfection. Incense was local to the Near East where Persian Zoroastrian sects would have been. And myrrh is a natural plant, suitable for a natural religion like Taoism.

In fact, during the years to come that were not reported in the New Testament, I happen to know what he was doing. He was visiting each of these lands, and learning the religious truths they had to offer. Like the Jews, they didn't fully accept him as their Savior, but they didn't have a group of Pharisees judging him either.

In any case, with my job done, we Reapers were ready to leave. Jesus would fulfill the rest of the prophecies himself, he had been born, visited by wise men and shepherds, and his dad had been warned in a dream to head to Egypt. My tasks were done, it was time to...

"Hey, you can't go," a voice called to me. Jesus looked up at me with sad eyes. I found that the portal that we usually made to return to the Unseen World simply wasn't working. I couldn't go. And Jesus said, "Touch me and take me in your arms." I held the child Jesus tightly before he whispered, "see you later" to me and released his hold. Jesus plopped back into bed, waking his mother up. "Huh? Were you talking to someone?" Mary asked her son. "Woman, I had business with

the Reaper of the Unseen World. I was overdue a hug." Mary looked peeved at the disrespectful tone of her infant son, but shrugged. This was a child who never cried during his infancy. She knew him to be a somewhat creepy child. It was time to go, so I opened the portal with my scythe. Jesus waved at us while lying with his mother on the bed. And so, one of the longest jobs we had been tasked with was done. We would indeed see him later.

# MIDRASH

### Yomi

They called it the "Angel of Death." But it was actually me. I'm usually sad about my powers, but that day, I got to play an important role in the liberation of a people. This was a day where I used powers that I had not before or since, in order to show a people about God.

Let me backtrack a bit. As you know, we do not act in linear time. In the twentieth century, we helped a film maker make a realistic film about war. The film was directed by a known actor, you've perhaps heard of. Frank Sinatra? Originally, the film was to be a pro-war film, but it lacked depth. So we helped create a pocket universe for him, so he could test out ideas. Rinne, Seishi, and myself did an actual death and rebirth simulation, Bosatsu created the artificial universe, Chiku and Engaku managed the forests and calculated the military physics of weapons respectively. Because of this, he was able to test until he had just the story he wanted. He

concluded that war was pointless, and wrote a story called *None But The Brave*. In the set that we had made, some troops from United States were stranded on an island with some Japanese fighters. They were both cut off from their chain of command, and both forced into a desperate survival situation. The simulation that he filmed showed them working together as if there was no war, but as soon as the situation resolved, they had to go back to fighting. The end of the movie had this tagline, "Nobody ever wins."

After this, we headed to the past, where God had decided to help out a group of Jews that were being enslaved by Egypt. We ordinarily just carried out the aftermath of such conflicts, for example, if there was a violent revolt in Franch and bodies were left bloody in the street, I worked with my Pales to clean up the mess, between reaping the souls and having birds peck at the flesh, and decomposition. But here, the Jews had mostly managed to avoid overt conflict thanks to the decision of a man named Moses to follow God's command. He told the Egyptian Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" The Pharaoh, of course, was reluctant. He had a large workforce for public projects, population problems aside. But Moses persisted, and it helped that God had hired Chiku and I to help out. Nine of these were our project, but for the last, God and I worked together. Mostly, he did all the special effects, I just reaped the souls that he marked. These were firstborn children, who did not live in a house that had blood on the door painted by hyssop. In addition to this bloody door, they ate unleavened bread as commanded by God, had bitter

herbs, this apple dish that was supposed to represent mortar, eggs, and they were specifically required to take a lamb and dry-roast it. They were to eat all of this hurriedly, and if any was left over the next day, they had to burn it. So many families that had too much had to share it. And so, the people wandered away from Egypt led by a pillar of fire. They crossed the sea, only to have their pursuers drown when they tried to follow.

I was curious how all of that turned out for them, so I decided to check on them. In the meantime, some of these Jews had been exiled to Babylon, while others had stayed behind. Some of them sacrificed the lamb on the Temple they had built, while others worshiped at the mountain near them. The former group called themselves Jews, while the latter called themselves Samaritans or "Keepers." Each accused the other of not being real Jews, with the Samaritans accusing the others of being corrupted by Babylonian captivity. But it was clear that God had chosen the Jews, and that meant just that. Not the people who called themselves the Jews, but both groups. All of them were descendants of Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. All of them suffered through bondage from Egypt, and all had the Ten Commandments.

Time went on, and the Jews lost their Temple. They debated among themselves about what to do next, since for years they had a sacrifice at the Temple. Some said that they should sacrifice the animals at home, but the prevailing decision was to instead have a token lamb shank in remember of the fact

that the temple was gone. As time went on, they ate other foods as the main entree, including fish or chicken. But the law actually said this.

> The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, "This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household. If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbor, having taken into account the number of people there are. You are to determine the amount of lamb needed in accordance with what each person will eat. The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the members of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs. That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast. Do not eat the meat raw or boiled in water, but roast it over a fire—with the head, legs and internal organs. Do not leave any of it till morning; if some is left till morning, you must burn it. This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the LORD's Passover.

Nothing here said that sheep was clean and goat was unclean,

yet the Jews of the temple separated them. Nothing here mentioned chicken or fish, yet when they stopped eating lamb, they thought that was okay, even though they were told to eat lamb. Nothing here said anything about the Temple or Temple Mount, or even used the word "sacrifice." Nor was there mention of a rabbi in this section. It said to choose a lamb without any blemish, and for each man to kill one and share it with families that did not have enough. This community event was thrown aside because these Jews thought they needed things that they never used before the Temple was built. Meanwhile, the Jewish government actually made it illegal to sacrifice lamb (it wasn't clear if this rule only extended to the Temple Mount and people could do so privately, or whether they would beat down someone's door like a drug raid; I chuckled to myself at the idea of police confiscating sheep). On the other hand, the Samaritans still killed sheep every Passover. And then there were the Christians, who often ate sheep to remind them that Jesus was the Lamb of God, but it wasn't a mandatory sacrifice at all. All of this was a mess.

It wasn't my business, I told myself. I was a Reaper, and mortal concerns were fleeting. But I had seen the squabbles and bloodshed this led to. And my heart was moved. But never so much as this day...

**Jacob**

"Don't die!" I pleaded. Yahweh had brought my mother and I back to this land after a Holocaust and centuries of being

without a true home. Adolf Eichmann and many of the others that had persecuted our people had been brought to justice, and other countries helped us found our homeland again. I was still a child when all of this had been happening, but mother lived through it. She was my mother, and invested in making sure that I was healthy and found a good woman.

I wasn't even certain whether our people were persecuted with the other Jews when the Nazis had their Holocaust. Mom didn't like to talk about the past. Our people moved back to the Nablus area centuries ago, and we have had a family farm for centuries at the on the outskirts of Mount Gerizim.  We were Samaritans, but we lived in a farm in a small town right next to a Jewish family headed by a man named Solomon that had more recently moved here. Solomon had moved here with his wife and children when the stress of city life had gotten to him, and it always seemed like he had trouble with his parents. In any case, after a long period of adjustment, his family settled near us.

If there was a map of Palestinian and Jewish controlled areas, Solomon and I lived just over the line where it had dual control, as I lived just slightly east of Nablus. It was a bit harder of a trip to Mount Gerizim, so I usually had to walk a bit in order to worship. I wasn't as close to my Samaritan brethren as I could have been, but this was where our farm had always been. I had never found a wife. Nonetheless, my mother had been a great help. And now she was dying, leaving me alone.

I prayed and I prayed, but it was her time. She had always struggled with a mysterious bad cough, and now the sickness was claiming her. She gave a final pathetic wheeze and died. The timing couldn't have been worse. I had slaughtered a lamb only hours ago in preparation for Passover. My brothers and sisters had gone to Ukraine, because our community had grown too small, and I had not heard back from them. Knowing what I did about the weather this time of year around there, I wasn't convinced they would arrive in time for Passover. And so I asked around, but it was a long walk and dinner was almost upon us. Ultimately, I had to ask my neighbor Solomon if he would join us.

SOLOMON

I saw that Jacob needed company during this difficult time. His mother had just died, his family was not here to visit, and there was nobody in his community that would help, as they already had food. We agreed to spend time with him, and to ease his discomfort. And his family had done us many good deeds when we worked on our farm in the past. Jacob's mother, especially, had taught us several techniques when we first moved to this area. My wife and I were a family from the big city, who wanted to get away from the bustle, and she helped us adjust to farm lifestyle.

But we couldn't help him with his lamb. And so, while he said, "*Barukh atah Adonai Eloheynu melekh ha-olam asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu lehadlik ner shel yom tov*" and blessed the food, we began to become more and more

uncomfortable. The wine was blessed, the washing preparation was done, the spring vegetables began to be eaten. Then the matzoh was divided, and the symbols were shown. Our children asked the questions.

> Why is this night different from all other nights?
> On all other nights we eat leavened products and matzah, and on this night only matzah.
> On all other nights we eat all vegetables, and on this night only bitter herbs.
> On all other nights, we don't dip our food even once, and on this night we dip twice.
> On all other nights we eat sitting or reclining, and on this night we only recline.

It was explained that these were symbols of the Exodus, how we had to leave quickly, and baked bread in a hurry. How these herbs were bitter to reflect the bitter slavery of our people. And so on. We ate the matzoh and bitter herbs, and sang songs such as *Dayenu*. It was rapidly nearing the time where the Paschal Lamb would be eaten.

But my family glared at me.

As I had learned from studying history, at one point after the fall of the temple, it had been proposed that they instead eat at home. But peer pressure had won out, and the Jewish people said no more lamb should be sacrificed if there wasn't a temple. From then on, we ate vegan dishes or chicken or fish, but lamb was off the menu.

Here too, peer pressure won out. I caved. Jacob put his hand

on my back, as though to say, "It's okay, I'm not gonna hold this against you." The two of us sighed.

Soon the meal was over. The unfinished lamb sat there. Our children looked for the *afikomen*, the hidden matzoh, said grace after the meal, sang songs of praise, and opened the door for Elijah. Rather than Elijah, a strange man with long hair entered and some disc-shaped scars on his wrists, and sat down at the vacant chair. He grabbed the lamb, and began eating from around the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket. Needless to say, all of us were appalled. But even though some of the family clearly wanted to remove him from Elijah's seat, none of us moved. He was clearly a Christian, because he did not observe our laws. But I could tell that Jacob was relieved that *someone* was able to eat his lamb. Then as suddenly as he appeared, he greeted us, blessed our friendship, and walked out of sight.

**Yomi**

That day, the life of a lamb was given in vain. I reaped it with my scythe, I waited for Solomon's family to reconsider, but Jacob had to eat most of the thing himself. Obviously, that wasn't possible. And so, the next day, a practically whole lamb was burned to cinders. I sighed. These people were not at war with each other, yet even so, a simple gift of food was loaded down with too much historical baggage.

Then I heard the lamb soul bleating at me. "Oh all right. Come along then," I said. I gave it to Rinne, who escorted it to the Afterlife. The lamb would have an Afterlife filled with

contentedly munching grass, where nobody would demand its life. For it had suffered enough.

As for Jacob, he did eventually find a wife to keep him company. His siblings returned from Ukraine with a blond woman with mysterious scars on her wrists. She never explained where they were from, and Jacob never asked. Instead, he read to his children the story of his namesake Jacob wrestling a man, and how during the battle his hip had been injured. "And that," he explained, "is why the people of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob never eat the meat near the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket."

# ANOINTED ONES

### Yomi

Sigh... Sometimes I really hate my job. As a Reaper, I cannot die, but if I were to do nothing, I know I would become bored and suicidal rather quickly. But I know that as Reaper of Death, there is a logical contradiction with the idea of killing myself. Still, my job is rather unpleasant, compared with the others. Chiku gets to make flowers bloom. Seishi gets to see a baby as it is first delivered from the womb. But I... I get the dubious honor of watching the sick, the lonely, and the old as they breathe their last. Some, like the depressed, rush towards death. These people make my life easier, as the suicides become Pales of Death. But most of them have a pained look on their face during their final moments. "Please don't let me die!" they cry out, but I have to end their lives. If that isn't

bad enough, their loved ones with their pleading eyes that sometimes turn angry.
Hey people, if I didn't do my job, this would would be so packed that nobody would be able to move around. But I help send them them on, where Rinne and Seishi help things run smoothly.
Ahhh right, why am I talking about this? Well, it's because of the strange things I deal with on a daily basis. Humans make problems for Reapers with their destructive impulses, with everything from strange spells that we have to correct (at one point, these court wizards summoned some weather called the Oobleck), to hysteria like the Salem Witch Trials, to actual Monsters being summoned by their imagination. It is not that humans have the power with anything they do to overturn God's plans, but they are designated as co-creators by God, so this means they can cause a great deal of trouble. Today was, I am ashamed to admit, something far worse than the normal frog rain or summoning meteor showers to deal with an enemy town, I'm afraid. But it was part of the job description.
It all started, as many of our bigger problems do, thousands of years ago. You see, the prophet Ezekiel had made three prophecies of particular importance. First, that the Messiah would come as the Lord himself, and pass through the eastern gates of the Temple. Second, that a Temple would be built by God that had none of the stupid restrictions that the other temples had (no court separating men and women, no wall keeping out Gentiles, no incense needed for the forgiveness

of sins, and no veil to separate humans from God). This Temple appears to have been built in the death of Christ, so that leads us to the third prophecy. That once all of this was completed, the gate would be forced shut.
Humans, whether Jews or Gentile, try to pretend these prophecies don't exist, holding out for the Messiah to come (or come again). But the gates are closed, and it's intended this way. Unfortunately, humans sometimes take matters into their own hands...

## Rachel

I had seen my parents carry on at the Wailing Wall when I was growing up. As a Jewish woman growing up in Israel, I saw the Temple Mount where instead the monstrosity known as the Dome of the Rock was built over top our sacred grounds. I was not a typical Jew. I had Christian friends, who showed me the difference between their text and mine. One of these friends, before I stopped listening to him, had told me that the Messiah had already come through the gate and that all of our waiting and hoping was worthless. I couldn't accept that. I knew that the Messiah would come and free us from our oppressors. But his words annoyed me. Year passed, and I still couldn't let it go. I had argued with him as a teenager, but was now a grown woman. I had become fixated on a single thought, the idea that the Messiah would come in my generation. Even if I had to bring it about myself!
While other Jewish women were faithfully following the Torah,listening to the rabbis, and preparing for their day of marriage, I was becoming estranged from the community. I

went to the synagogue, but something felt missing deep inside my heart. It was like Adonai was calling me, telling me to follow this goal. I couldn't seem to let go. I was beginning to see these Muslims who defaced our holy mountain as the Amalekites that I had read about in Esther. I was beginning to draw parallels between the events of Maccabees, and how the Temple was defaced in those times to the building that was literally parked on our holy ground.

All of this was in my mind while I heard the Torah being read at the synagogue. I couldn't concentrate for the rest of the service, and I left in a funk. I live south of the site of the Temple Mount, north of what is called Hezekiah's Tunnel, to the east of Wadi Hilwa, and just south of HaOfel. The synagogue that I left was called Four Sephardic Synagogues. Or rather, it's a complex of four synagogues joined together, though the one that I left was Synagogue Emtsai. It occurred to me that I had actually left before the service was over and actually created a small stir, but by this point, I had already wandered several blocks. It was Saturday morning, but a strange force led me to explore the town. I walked up a ramp, and continued parallel to the road, eventually winding up in a forested area. Trying to get my bearings, I walked slightly to the west, and I figured it out, but something was odd. It appeared that I was currently in the woods between the roads of HaOfel and Jericho, but here was a tunnel that I'd never noticed before.

Following it, I saw the two sealed doors of the Golden Gate, the *Bab al-Rahma* and the *Bab al-Taubah.* While I found it

bizarre that this emptied to the exact area that I wanted to be, stranger still was that there were no authorities near the wall, no guards, no Muslims, and in the other direction any traffic that might have witnessed me. It was as though I had arrived at the dead of night, but the sun was still up. Stranger still was that there was a sledgehammer sitting on the ground with text inscribed on it. It seemed to glow slightly, but that must have been the sun.

**Satan**

I shall be honest. I may have tweaked circumstances slightly so as to give her an opportunity. She just seemed so earnest that I wanted her to go ahead with things. I may have possibly contracted some of the Reapers (particularly Bosatsu) to make traffic head elsewhere, and to create the tunnel and such. I was tempted sorely to see what would happen if she succeeded. And no, I didn't care about "bringing the coming of the Antichrist." There were Antichrists every day. But, a break from the monotony was sorely needed these days.

Rachel

I lifted the sledgehammer and was about to swing at the gate, when a little girl called at me. "Wha'cha doing there?" she asked. Startled by her sudden question, I almost dropped my tool. I wasn't particularly strong, but the hammer seemed sturdy to smash the wall with one blow, yet light enough to lift with one hand. I tried to ignore her and swing again, but she interrupted again, "So you're gonna bust up the Messiah's Gate? You sure about that?" I eyed her, "What? Are you

going to call the police?" She shook her head vigorously, "No way! But if you do that, they'll come. Are certain that's what you want?" *They?* I explained to her, "The Jews have been waiting for the Messiah to come, but this gate and this graveyard beyond it is in the way. The Messiah is the only hope of the Jewish people for all of these years." I looked at the girl. She seemed very familiar, as though I had known her for thirty years or something, but that was impossible. She couldn't have been more than about eight years old. The girl quoted *Final Fantasy X*, a game far older than she, "Hope is...comforting. It allows us to accept fate, however tragic it might be," she continued, "The Jews wanted another Messiah because they couldn't accept that their Messiah did not oppose their enemies or that the Temple fell due to their own disobedience. The Christians wanted the Messiah to come again, because they couldn't accept a world where everything was resolved yet evil still exists. The Muslims didn't want the Messiah, so people like Saladin blocked this very entry. Yet here we are, the kingdom of God that Daniel prophesied has been built, but evil still exists. The third Temple that Ezekiel prophesied has been built, but people still do not understand why this pathway has been sealed." I was strongly tempted to ask, "*Just who are you?!?*" The child was abnormally knowledgeable about the Torah, after all. Instead, the first thing out of my mouth was, "What are you **talking** about? Our Temple is still fallen! Our Messiah never came! And we certainly don't have the kingdom that Daniel foretold!" I got a pitying look that seemed to say, *You poor child, you still see*

*so little*, but at this point the fact that a child was looking down on me made me annoyed enough to start bashing away at the wall. The little girl shrugged and said, "If you ever want the wall filled in, just call my name, and I'll do it for you." A few hours later, I was done. I left the hammer where it was, and I returned back to home.
The next day, there was an uproar of sorts. I work as a secretary in a small office building, answering phone calls, and delivering things to my manager. Unlike the day before, where I was dressed in comfortable slacks and a tee shirt that said, « המשיח מגיע » (I had my prayer clothing for worship, but since I had nobody over for Sabbath, I tossed those clothes in a bag to go for a walk), today I wore a smart white blouse, black jacket and skirt, nude stockings, and some black pumps. But as it turned out, I only had a half-day. Everyone was talking about strange events and I was sure that some police officers would notice my fingerprints on the hammer. As it turned out, no hammer was found at the scene. The news said instead that the gate appeared to have been professionally opened, showing a pan of the Golden Gate cleanly opened, not like my random bashing with a hammer. Moreover, there were more changes. Overnight, apparently the Wailing Wall was rebuilt, as were northern, southern, and eastern walls.  The Dome of the Rock was shoved out of the way, and the Temple Mount was swept clean. More importantly, Herod's temple had returned! All of the gates were usable, the Court of Women was back, and so were all of the other features of the temple. I watched the news some

more, "Wait, I see something! Is that...? Yes, it appears someone is entering the gate reserved for the Messiah!" A man introducing himself as Ari Adir Ben Judah came through the gate riding a donkey and carrying a rod of iron. He pointed his finger at several Muslim and Christian worship sites, and an earthquake swallowed each other them up. The man was well-built, more of a warrior than a king, but he appeared to not only be strong enough to lift the donkey that he was holding but it appeared that God was working miracles through him.

I decided that the time I had hoped for had finally come, and this would be the man to liberate the Jews from their oppressors. And so, I got in my car, made up my face, and headed over to the western wall of the temple, where we had always worshiped. However, the traffic was jammed, so I had to park my car. I saw a great deal of people also walking. "Did you hear?" one asked me, "The Messiah has come!" I nodded, "Yeah, I heard, his name was Ari Adir something?" But he shook his head, "No, there was another one! He's called Atarah David Shalom. He just said 'May there be peace everywhere.' In the last hour, there has been no fighting anywhere in the world! Surely the promised on has come." Another man mentioned a man named simply Orel who apparently spoke only a single word in some ancient dialect of Aramaic or Hebrew, and the Temple had rebuilt itself. Yet another named Reuben Emmanuel had raised the dead around the Muslim graveyard blocking the entrance, and used them to sweep the grounds clean.

As I made my way into the ancient path to the refurbished second Temple, I remembered the commentary some of my old Christian friends had told me of some of the excesses of Herod's temple. Those with skin conditions like atopic dermatitis, psoriasis, and rosacea were forbidden from entering further. So was I. As a woman, I was treated little better than what would traditionally be called a leper. The practice of sacrifice offerings had resumed, as had the practice of buying and selling sacrificial animals. I slipped out before anyone noticed me. There was something very wrong about this Temple. But beyond that, there was something very wrong with all of this.

I sat on a bench outside the walls of the Mount and thought. Then I remembered what the little girl had predicted, "But if you do that, they'll come. Are certain that's what you want?" She had known that this would happen. I thought about what the girl looked like. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that she looked like *me* as a child. *But that was impossible!* I thought. I needed to meet her again, and talk to her. But before that, I needed to figure out what was going on here.

In a matter of days, I was back to work as a secretary, as people adjusted to the new normal. People began to pray at the new old Temple, and some even started sacrificing animals on the mountain. It was near Passover, so pretty soon everyone would decide to dispense with the lamb shanks and go ahead and eat the real thing. I was sure there were enough, honestly, since we hadn't prepped for the whole nation to be

eating lamb at once for quite a few centuries. But things were still changing. Priests were being anointed, having done a DNA test on ancestry and confirmed that they had the right bloodline. After the major Messiah candidates, a seemingly endless flow of "lesser Messiahs" all came through the Golden Gate, all gave some minor sign or made some speech, and all came in on a donkey. This happened over several weeks, but gradually the number swelled to 7560 candidates before it finally stopped. All of these crowded the Jerusalem area claiming to be the fulfillment of one prophecy or another, but most of them satisfying either the bloodline of King David, the prediction that the Messiah would be a strong leader that would restore the Temple and free Jerusalem from oppression, and so on. As for the four main ones, their power began to expand. Orel, no longer content with Herod's Temple began to stretch the height of this Temple higher and higher. Ari Adir Ben Judah had expanded outward from Jerusalem and was consolidating land around Israel, freeing it from hostile forces. Yes, that way. He raised his rod, and they were dead. Atarah David Shalom, no longer content with world peace, was trying to make his followers even unable to feel emotions, since fear leads to anger, and anger leads to hate, and hate leads to all sorts of darkness. Every person that he touched became utterly unable to feel anything. While peaceful, they had something missing in their souls. As Reuben Emmanuel's raised dead, he didn't stop with those near the Temple Mount, and began to raise all dead ever. The city became quite crowded as a result. I

brushed against one of them by accident and I felt a cold chill around me.
I jumped back as I felt a hand on my shoulder. "You noticed too, didn't you?" a woman's voice spoke to me, though it was hard to picture a woman standing at nearly double normal height, dressed in long black robes, and carrying a long scythe in her hand. She disappeared as my body fell away from her hand. She touched me again, this time slowly and gently, "I'm sorry, unless you're very old, very young, very sick, or very spiritually sensitive, I have to touch you in order for you to see and touch me. My name is Yomi, and I am the Grim Reaper. I was saying, you noticed it too? How those people... didn't seem quite alive?" This time, her hood had been pulled back, and her scythe lowered. She had long black hair and a surprisingly kind face. She looked like someone who had a lot personally regretted every death she had to cause. I looked again at the man who just walked away. There indeed was something strange about him. Now that Yomi was touching me, I looked again at the man. Where before, I only felt a chill, he looked totally different. There was this dark shadow possessing him, and he was hunched over strangely. And his skin looked to be in a severe form of decay. Like a zombie. "What... what is this?!?" I gasped. She explained that these people were using a power that was only borrowed from God. They weren't using their own power. "You must understand," she said, "these people are not the Messiah. They are given power to perform false miracles." But this didn't make sense. "But why?" I asked. And then I

heard a familiar voice behind me.
"Because... of you," the little girl explained. Like an insect caught in amber, the moment I looked into her eyes, I was pulled in. I wasn't standing in a crowded city, but rather a garden with a familiar face looking at me. It wasn't someone I could describe as a boy or a girl, it was a person, like I'd seen anywhere, but more importantly, I understood that this was the man Jacob wrestled with. A person so generic that it was unclear whether this was a black or white person, male or female, rich or poor, Jew or Gentile. It just didn't matter. This was a person, yet this was Yahweh as Adam and Eve had seen walking in the Garden of Eden. Yahweh reunited with mankind. Someone so gloriously familiar that my soul cried out that I loved this person instantly. The Jews had made all kinds of myths about how the presence of Adonai was so sacred that none could look on him and live. Yet now I understood now that these were just silly taboos. Would an all-powerful God really be unable to speak with others if they wished? I had to ask, "What is your name?" The person before me chuckled, "You humans and your names. I invented thousands of names for each of these false Messiahs. They are just angels. I strip them of their name, and they cease to be. My name? You can call me Yeshua, that's what I am called by some of those folks. Or you can call me any name you want. I am God, because I don't *need* a name to feel important. You can even call me Rachel." And suddenly, it was as though I was looking in the mirror. Dammit, I had a pimple on my shoulder. I fumbled for words

again, before I asked, "So what did you mean by that it happened because of me?" The other me sighed, "All your life you have been driven by a need to make sense of all this. Much more than others, who just accept what their rabbis tell them, and don't bother to question things. You talked to people outside your own faith because you wanted to figure out why the Messiah had taken so long. But it's like your friend said. I don't need to come back, because I already carried out my purpose. Those prophecies about me being a warrior king or making world peace? Or rebuilding the temple? They were what the *prophets* wanted. Don't you think that I would know what I wanted, and be able to decide that for myself? I came to you, not to convert you to Christianity or any other religion, but because it seemed like you really needed a friend. Your own group had rules for life, but you seemed lonely there." I thought of how little I fit with others, with my driven obsession with bringing about the coming of the Messiah. Or should I say Second Coming. I'd noticed a few Christians have picked a Messiah, and are telling others that they have the wrong one. I had another question though, "But, what happens if these continue here? Isn't it good to give people hope? I mean, you said earlier that 'Hope is comforting,' but I don't really understand. Can't the Golden Gate stay open?" The other me shrugged, "I could allow it, but a lot of them would have to go. They were designed to show you the problem with waiting for a Messiah. There can't be a single one that is all things to all people, so... I had to split this into several ideas. And each

idea has a unwanted logical extreme. Reuben Emmanuel would flood the world with undead, and there would be a zombie apocalypse. Even if I made them really come back to life, some would breed with the population, and the Earth would be a desert in about five years. Atarah David Shalom would take away free will and happiness. Even if only a small portion of people were touched by him, this is an unacceptable amount of bored listless people. Ari Adir Ben Judah will likely kill most of the population. Orel would continue to grow the size of the Temple until it was a second Tower of Babel. And have you noticed? The Temple has become an idol. I never intended anything beyond worship of me, and even that wasn't necessary. I don't have needs. I don't need to be worshiped. If it fills you with joy to share your devotion to me, then go ahead. But I don't need it, and I certainly don't want you getting obsessed with scrolls, buildings, walls, or other nonsense. These are just things. What I want, what I really want, is for you to figure out how you can be happy." But I really didn't know how to be happy, especially now that my sense of purpose was gone. I thought about it for quite some time. Then I told her that I had three wishes, "Uhhh, God? First, can you reseal the gates, and get rid of all of these jokers? And can you make it so nobody has any memory or videos or other records that anything happened? And ummmm, well this is gonna suck..." God probably knew what I was gonna say, but wanted to hear me say it. I said after some goading, "I want to be able to see your true face. But I suppose that means I'll have to die and

be in the World to Come." God shrugged, "You could, and I could get Yomi to kill you off. But it doesn't matter whether you're alive or dead. I can give you new eyes to see me." And so, I carried on a casual relationship, meeting different people, until finally I sorta settled down. Sorta. I never really got married, but carried on with a semi-regular lover. God eventually provided a girl named Nessa.

### Yomi

I returned to Unseen World. My job is hard on me, but some days are better than others. I am glad that I met Rachel, even though I might only ever see her again once. I hope that I can feel that sort of connection too one day. "Hey, what you thinking about?" said Seishi. Hmmmm, the two of us spend some time together. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to go on a 'date', I think the word those humans use to call it. Maybe later.

## PASSION

### Jin

I am the Reaper of Free Will. It is hard for me to do my job sometimes, watching as humans do all sorts of things that maybe they ought not to do. Unlike the other Reapers, my actions are mostly passive, allowing events to happen and only intervening when people feel like they don't have a choice.

I was there when this one's mother made the choice to deliver a very unorthodox child, and I was there when his father made a choice to stay married and to protect that child from

Herod, even though it wasn't his. I was there when Herod tried to kill Jesus. I was there when the disciples joined, when the Pharisees decided to cooperate with Rome to have him executed, when Pilate caved to peer pressure, and when Judas decided to betray him with a kiss for a few pieces of silver. I saw each of these choices.

I also saw the disciples choose to save their own skins, and the crowd choose to become a mob against him. But I saw good choices too. I saw people who tried to visit him in the cross. Who came to visit him after he died. Who donated a tomb for his burial. So many choices, good and bad, in those days.

**Engaku**

I heard the rhythmic crack of the whip. One stroke. Another stroke. Two strokes, back to back. Three strokes in a row. Five strokes. Was it just me, or was there a Fibonacci sequence? However, I did not see this pattern continue, although the flailing most certainly did continue. The soldiers of Rome were going to divide his garments, as I calculated how many scraps and what length and width would be required to have an even portion of cloth for use as rags. But then the soldiers decided to play a game of chance for this clothing instead, ensuring that only one of them would make use of it. How illogical.

**Rinne**

I'm not sure that Engaku understood what she was seeing. She is very logical, but her logic doesn't allow for a great deal of understanding about events in the world of humans

and their emotions. I was a bit better about this. I could understand why Judas had betrayed Jesus, why the Jewish leaders wanted him gone, and why Pilate was so reluctant. He had a warning a few days ago that he should not let this man be crucified, but despite his power on paper, he was actually a very weak man.

I watched as they mocked him, asking him to save himself, as they put a crown of thorns on him, and dressed him in purple robes, as they gave him wine mixed with myrrh. This was to numb the pain, a small mercy, but he refused. I watched as he carried a cross, but in his weakened state, he fell. Another man known as Simon of Cyrene helped him. The two of them marched up to the site, where the cross piece was slid into a slat, completing the instrument of execution. He was then nailed to the structure, thick metal driven through his feet and hands. Unlike hanging, crucifixion is a long and slow process. The body is hung, and slowly loses oxygen, as they try to pull themselves up by straightening their legs, but since their legs are nailed down, they are in a constant state of discomfort, fighting for every breath of air by trying to boost themselves. While it potentially took days for those who were crucified, Jesus took only a few hours because he was also badly wounded. Nevertheless, he made the most of his time. He called his mother to adopt one of his friends as a son. He fulfilled prophecies. He forgave sins of his accusers. He told a fellow accused who defended him when everyone else mocked him that he would also be there with him this day. And he set up a system that revised our Afterlife.

It was my mission to guide Jesus once he died, but unlike the others he walked willingly with me. He did not need any "coaxing" from Yomi. I also carried the two who died with him on the cross that day, but they were a little later. Jesus had died before them.

**Bosatsu**

At the time of Jesus's death, a number of unnatural occurrences happened. I say unnatural, because even supernatural events, I have a part in, and I am normally ordered to help carry them out. But there were no events planned for me that day. This was all God, and Jesus himself. For several hours, the sun went dark. This could not be explained away as a solar eclipse, because during Passover, the sun and moon were in the wrong position for a solar eclipse, and beside which, this was simply too long an event. Also, the veil of the Temple was torn from top to bottom, symbolically ripping the separation created by the Unseen World. Now humans were connected to the spiritual world directly. I am convinced that this is what this act means. Not only that, but these events were followed by earthquakes and people raising from the dead. As a Reaper, I could actually see this event from both sides of the Unseen World. While they saw frightening events at their end, I saw the utter breakdown of the rules of the Unseen World. The Afterlife had been set up for centuries so that that the dead would stay dead, but I saw Jesus in the robe and crown of a king with a sword in his hand, speaking to the dead while he marched to the edge of the Afterlife and slashed an exit hole in it. The

Harrowing of Hell, it later came to be called. This hole was later built into a doorway, where all had a chance to overcome death. As for the Temple where the veil was torn, I watched over the next 40 years as a new Temple appeared in the Unseen World over the site of the old one. As Herod's Temple was smashed up, the new Temple was built over it. A Temple where all people could worship in spirit and truth.

**Chiku**

A little known part of my job is that I ensure that those that can be seen by humans have a body, whether animal, plant, human, or otherwise. They are made of flesh, have bones, and have blood. All of these are constructed from organic and inorganic materials found in nature. So when Jesus returned, without a mortal body, I was rightly a bit miffed. Here was someone who could simply appear and his own friends wouldn't recognize him. I know that the natural world is somewhat disordered, but this is too much, even for me! We can't have ferns suddenly turning into zebras, nor can we have shapechanging people, or people passing through walls, yet also being able to eat food and getting other people to touch their hands and side. Honestly, I had enough on my plate with thousands of new species of fungus. What was God thinking?!?

**Yomi**

Normally, I reap people, and that's the end. They go quietly into whatever Afterlife they can imagine they deserve, my job is done, and I'm assigned to another dying person. But... this one escaped me. Well, I kinda knew it would happen,

since Jesus is the incarnation of God. I know Ambrosia pretty well, and she doesn't put up with crap. So any child of hers would be just like her.

Oh sure, I cut my scythe through him. But he died because his spirit left his body, well before I got there. The Romans were similarly confused. They knew their business, and when it came to break his legs, he seemed to be already dead, so they tested this by stabbing him with a spear instead.

And he raised to life again so that his spirit could collect his body. And his body, soul, and spirit returned to the Afterlife. And he kept returning back to the living world, over and over again. Until Ambrosia assured me that I would not lose my job over this, I was pretty worried actually.

**Seishi**

Normally, after Rinne guides souls to the Afterlife, I help them get reborn into new bodies. But this Jesus character simply refused to cooperate. The nerve! Here I was telling him about the benefits of being born again, and he simply looked at me and smirked. Then he basically wandered outside of my authority, and did his own thing. Now I have to answer to him instead.

**God**

There is something that you should know. The event that these Reapers saw was actually a staged event. I guess you can call it a set-up. I showed them the actual birth and death of Jesus, but disguised the time frame. They thought they were covering the Passion which happened in about 30 AD or so. Actually, my Reapers were among the only individuals

that met the real Jesus, though many came to know him after his resurrection.
Remember how I spoke about the white screen? Well, using this, I showed them a movie. The events were real, and it was very much a snuff film, so to speak. But the costumes of those who crucified him were composited to look like Roman centurion uniforms, the Jews of the time (the ancient religions all existed) were dressed to look like 1st century Jews, the technology (which was based on magic and rather futuristic) was toned down to look similar to the time period. Yet the world itself was actually the Ancient Earth, roughly a million or two years before when most people knew of the crucifixion. The crucifixion of 30 AD did happen, but it was of a fox girl named Rena, who was impersonating Jesus because mankind had forgotten about the cross. As for that event, I blocked it out from the rest of reality. The Jews and Romans there couldn't place the date, the Reapers never knew about it, even though they passed by streets where people were born and died in that time and place through careful blocking of scene and times when crowds met Rena, they disappeared from sight and entered a pocket reality. This did have a weird side effect where witnesses against Rena (as Jesus's understudy) couldn't agree what she had said when they tried to testify against her. The real Jesus came for the hybrids of beast and man in addition to the poor and oppressed. The real Jesus was also listened to after his resurrection, while the Jews that encountered Rena insisted that she couldn't be the real Messiah. They were kinda right,

though the Eastern Gate did close after she performed her mission.
The real Jesus was not put on a cross at all, but hung on a tree. Specifically, the people of the time found a branch of the the world tree, Yggdrasil, and proceeded to plant it. It grew into a stunted version of this tree before exhausting the nearby nutrients. As it was written, "*Everyone who is hung on a tree is cursed."* And so, before most myth recorded it, Jesus before the curse of sin in this world. The tree was starting to sicken and die, having grown only 30,000 feet. The soil of the Ancient Earth did not agree with it, but after he died, it bloomed and grew again, even after everything else in the Ancient Earth died off.

# REAPER IN LOVE

**Yomi**

…

**Jin**

Say something already!

**Yomi**

Everything in life is predetermined. From the birth, to the people you meet, to ultimately your death. Oh you may think you have choices. But you are limited by geography who you can meet. You are limited by knowledge and culture what you can eat. And you are definitely limited by unseen forces in other choices. In the end, most choices boil down to either to take what is given, try to change things at effort or expense, or opt out. And there are some choices that you

simply don't have, for instance... You cannot choose not to die. Any more than I can choose to quit my job to fall in love. In this life, we must resign ourselves to what fate has to offer. Which reminds me... I have to head out. I have souls to take.

**Jin**

I watched as she left. There was such a sad face on that woman! I'm Jin, Reaper of Free Will, as I've mentioned before. My mission on the Earth is to make sure humans have free will. Of course, as humans have free will by default, so unlike Reapers like Yomi who are constantly working, I have too much free time. I don't want to be bored and miserable, so I find things to do. Well, it isn't a total picnic. I do a fair amount of talking people out of suicides, preventing totalitarian rule, and giving people ideas that ultimately lead to richer lives. And yet, his words are true, this world as it is now has only limited options. I want to change things! But first, I want to give Reapers themselves more to work with. For you see, Reapers aren't even allowed to fall in love, much less quit. Hmmm, something she said about not having a choice about... We'll see about that!

**Yomi**

"Hey weird hooded people, can you help me?" a little girl entreated us. She was at the age of imagination, the point before humans stopped seeing the supernatural. Of course, the elderly saw us again, but it was very definitely not her time to die. Young children, the elderly, the dying, and sometimes the mourning were the only ones who could see us without us touching them.

The little girl pointed at the tree, as I asked, "What seems to be the problem?" She explained, "My kitty is stuck in this tree. Can you rescue it?" Honestly? That was the job for a fireman, not a Reaper. But we found ourselves nodding. Reapers are superhuman, and we could easily jump up even a coastal Sequoia without much trouble. But about this tree... Yggdrasil was old, beyond ancient in fact. When the Unseen World was chosen as the background of the visible universe, a seed was planted. This seed connected all of the nine "planets", which were given Roman names after the gods. But their actual names were Midgard (Earth), Asgard (Jupiter), Alfheim (Venus), Vanaheim (Mercury), Muspelheim (Pluto), Nibelheim (Neptune), Jotunheim (Saturn), Hel (Uranus), and Svartalfheim (Mars). Just like in the solar system, whether Muspelheim was part of the Nine Realms was sometimes debated, with another world sometimes swapped for Muspelheim. Unlike the solar system, these worlds were occupied.

They are arranged slightly differently from the solar system model, of course. The most obvious difference though was that many of them had their own sun and moon rather than a distant sun somehow serving all of these. The Sun cared for Yggdrasil, while Midgard's sun orbited around it along with its moon, rather than the other way around. Somehow or other, her cat had wandered onto the branches of Yggdrasil, and was climbing on a branch that housed Alfheim. I suppose it could have been far worse, if that kitty was climbing near Muspelheim and managed to make it there, she would only

get cat barbecue back. Alfheim was full of friendly elves that would give the kitty a nice petting, but the girl wanted her cat back. "*Float*," I said, allowing me to fly outside her location, up the trunk, and snatch the cat. However, a giant spider blocked the way. While we Reapers are immortal, some creatures can present a significant challenge to us. This enormous spider could be nicked and scratched by our weapons, but most of them only did glancing blows due to the fact that one of its legs was roughly the size of a house. Rinne or I was usually able to cut creatures in half with our heavy blows, but my scythe couldn't even penetrate enough to activate its death effect. "Yomi, you defend Seishi. Seishi, hold this cat, and make sure nothing happens to either of them. I'm gonna get eaten. It can't actually digest me, so I might be able to attack it from inside." And with that, she jumped straight in its mouth.

**Rinne**

My original plan was make it to its heart, and stab it to death. I suppose I should have read biology books written by humans. Spiders do not have a centralized heart, but rather a long tube carrying their blood. But before that, they have a sucking stomach, also a tubelike thing, which connects to their digestive cecum, as well as branching like a tree to their ovaries, malphigian tubule, stercoral pocket, and finally releasing from their anus. I was dealing with a whole tangled web of internal organs, some of which, I had no idea their purpose. I was in for an ordeal, if I was going to kill this critter in time.

**Seishi**

Yomi fought valiantly to protect me and the poor girl's cat while I held it and cuddled. The cat nuzzled against my scythe, discovering it was no danger, despite its apparent sharpness. The cat was a gray and white long-haired of some breed that I wasn't familiar with. It had pointed grayish ears with black tips, and a wild wavy hair that was gray on the top of its head and part of the midsection, but white everywhere else. As part of our powers as Reapers, we sometimes gain knowledge or insight that pertains to our mission, so while I personally knew nothing of this cat, because it was my mission to save it from being eaten, I became increasingly certain that it was a Norwegian Forest Cat, and was a type of Angora breed. This didn't really help, except I knew now how better to cuddle it. And I knew that it suffered from hip displasia and that its breed was susceptible to Glycogen branching enzyme issues. I passed my hand across it and said, "*Heal Ailment*." As our powers don't need runes, I didn't have to worry about the area being so remote that runes were actually rare here, I didn't have to worry about having enough mana. I just spoke and it was so. The cat snuggled against my scythe, made a characteristic chirping sound found only on that breed, and fell asleep.

Yomi on the other hand, did not have things so easily. She valiantly slashed away at the spider, but it was immune to her scythe's death effect, being a higher creature from Asgard and a descendent of Loki. But even the gods could be killed, all but us Reapers and God himself. Just not from instant death

magic. All the same, knowing that she was at a standoff against a much larger creature, she fought courageously to defend us both. I started muttering defensive and healing effects using the free hand that was only supporting the cat from underneath to cast it. I didn't move said hand, lest the kitten fall, but instead unclenched my fist and underhanded pointed to her. The buffs carried to her, and she was defended against even minor scratches and cuts. We couldn't be killed, but pain was a constant nuisance for someone who lived like us. Especially pain of the heart.

Reaper scythes return immediately to a strap on the holder's robe when they are disarmed. They are a symbol of the Reaper's office, and their best weapon against the creatures of darkness. Yet my hands were so full with this wee beastie that it managed to disarm me. I was pathetic. But when I looked up at Yomi, she just seemed so manly and awesome, defending the both of us.

Maybe it was because I normally just saw her fighting and never got the chance to see her in this position. Maybe it was the sparkles that I seemed to see around her as she performed dashing feats, slashing the spider's leg, belly, fangs, and thorax hoping for a weak point. She was an actual blur to mortals like the cat, but I could see her as if she was going in slow motion. Then my heart began to beat quickly, thinking of her. What was wrong with me? Was I coming down with something? Or was this what those humans called love?

I had seen these humans and their love. By all accounts, they didn't know what they were doing.  They called arranged

marriages in India more successful than romantic marriages, when actually the two partners were trapped in a system that wouldn't let them separate, and it had more to do with dowry or a parent's approval than anything resembling affection. Or marrying a child when you are forty, and marrying three other wives. Or marrying for money or convenience, as if money could hold you in its arms. Or marrying for love, then cheating for pretty pathetic reasons.

No, surely this was not love, and I was suffering from some Reaper disease. I resolved to have Bosatsu check me out later. But for now, I had more important things to worry about. I felt a twinge as the shield that I made shook, and slight pain as it shattered. The spider continued, leaving a nasty gash on her face that might leave a stylish scar if untreated, and the other legs poked her in the belly, sliced at her hamstrings, and poked at her chest. The spider wouldn't be able to kill her. But until her woulds healed, she would be in a lot of pain. "Yomi!!!" I cried, rushing towards her, even knowing that I had no offensive weapons against it.

Just then, the spider suddenly collapsed, spewing blood from every orifice. Rinne pried its mouth open, probably expecting congratulations for being the conquering hero. But my attention was drawn wholly to Yomi, kneeling toward her prone form. I whispered words of healing, while the kitty nuzzled her and perched itself on her breasts, covering the wounds there without actively trying. "It's okay... I can't die, remember?" she said shakily. It didn't stop me from worrying for her, as I set to work.

I started with her face, spending most of my energy making sure there wouldn't be a scar. I looked long and hard, healing first the gore (the blow had actually penetrated her skull through her eye and left ear, leaving a gaping hole, which would later heal on its own into a slight cut if untreated), then after regenerating her ears, eyes, and the entire left side of her skull, I set to work on making her look beautiful again. Not that I needed much help. With her cute turn-up nose, thin eyebrows, heart-shaped face, and long dark hair, I was fascinated by looking at her, even as I closed the last of her wounds like it had never happened. I touched her chest and back of her legs, when all of a sudden, she moved forward and planted a kiss on my lips. I flinched for a second, but only because I was startled. After a second, I eased back in and kissed her back. We held our kiss for a time, then she extended her tongue into my mouth. I returned the gesture, and suddenly I had an image in my head of sharing a paopu fruit. The star-shaped goodness. It was only later that I recognized that this wasn't my own memories but more of the same task information that Reapers received to help them do their job. For some reason, it was glitching and giving me references from *Kingdom Hearts*.

Then it was back on track as we removed each other's robes, helping me massage her breasts and other erogenous zones. I had literally never seen scissoring before this moment, but Yomi and I both instinctively understood how to do this. The kitten bounced off us when we removed our clothes, but stuck around, curious and interested by what we were doing.

Rinne finally grabbed it, telling us, "I'm gonna return this little one to its master." She didn't seem to be upset, just left out.
I sucked on her breasts, slowly yet carefully, touching her playfully in the waist while doing so. Yomi was normally so moody and depressed from her job, but it seemed all of the tension had gone out of her, much like a scared cat which has been huffed, and is now totally at peace with the world. She started to really relax, and began to nibble at my ears. Her hands traveled down along my legs and worked their way towards my crotch. I wasn't as big chested as her, but I had wider hips, and well to be honest, a very sensitive pussy. When her hands brushed that spot, I gasped for a second as an electric charge ripped through my body. I stopped sucking for a second as my neck arched, almost hitting her head. Her breasts now free, she moved atop me with her mouth, sucking my breasts while rubbing my clit and my vagina up and down with her fingers. Then her fingers moved inside me. "No wait, Yomi! Yomi, you're gonna make me go crazy~!" I said between moans. Her other hand touched the small of my back in a particularly ticklish spot, so I stifled a giggle only to once again feel a twinge of ecstasy as both my nipples and crotch were on fire with sensation. Her mouth and fingers suddenly switched places, with her fondling my breasts while she started licking at my pussy. Her mouth moved up to my clit, and she started sucking hard. After awhile, she stopped sucking as I reached down, and grabbed her breasts. I spread my legs, and the two of us bumped and

grinded for a good thirty minutes or so. She lay back exhausted, while I proceeded to suck on her nether regions, so to speak. It occurred to us only much later to ask the obvious. "Where's Rinne?" Yomi said.

**Rinne**

No, I didn't get all huffy and leave those two. The three of us had all been together for centuries. I considered Seishi and Yomi to be colleagues, and more than that, dear friends. I wanted the best for both of them, and I was glad that they had finally noticed what I had suspected over two centuries ago, that those two were meant for each other.

It's just... I didn't have a love of my own, so even though such a thing as embarrassment doesn't really exist among Reapers, I was nonetheless reluctant to watch them, as it was a grim reminder of my own aloneness. More importantly, Reapers weren't supposed to be able to fall in love. We were women with no active sex organs, and no understanding of human feelings. At least, this is what we were taught. To the best of my knowledge, none of us had tried it. The risks were too great. We had been told that if any Reapers fell in love, we would lose what made us Reapers and become mortal. Security or Maintenance would handle us.

There is a complicated hierarchy of how things work outside the scope of human life. We Reapers are immortal, and born at roughly the same moment that God made light from the Void. We in turn have Pales, mostly mortal assistants made from humans, birds, or other creatures. These do the bulk of our workload so that we aren't guiding every little bacteria or

fungi into the Afterlife. Then there is God. God has angels to deal with mortal affairs, God has us to deal with behind the scenes events of reality, but God also has Maintenance to deal with glitches (mostly when we make mistakes) and Security to deal with threats. In the entire history of the created universe, Security has only had to deal with Monsters, never a renegade Reaper. But I wouldn't want to know what happens if one does disobey...

**Yomi**

Seishi and I finished embracing and returned to Rinne. Over the next few months, the two of us deepened our connection. With the resources available to us, we able to explore virtually anywhere or any time. I went back to the supposed age of dinosaurs to show her that dinosaurs weren't in fact real. Seishi and God worked together to create some as a prank. Ambrosia, as God, approved of our union after all. We explored the universe, walking in the strange alien landscape of other worlds. This current one had three suns and seven moons, with light green water turning a shade of aqua as the blue suns  receded away from the sky. The sunset of all three suns was a rare occurrence, but a truly awe-inspiring spectacle. We even traveled to the early 20th century to watch the first screening of a film known as *Metropolis*, before the censors cut much of the footage.

We kept up our job, but I could tell we were getting distracted. One child born to two normal parents appeared to have tentacles, and all of the hallmarks of a Monster. Rinne slapped a quick Glamour on him in hopes that this would

cover things up, though there was a fair amount of random gibbering from this flesh beast. He later became president of the United States in the early 21st century. Meanwhile, I allowed a number of people to live to about 900 years or so in ancient Israel, and when I tried to get back into things, I caused a whole lot of infant deaths in Ireland. I may have been overcompensating.

We had just finished exploring a city at the height of technology, before technology itself got replaced by the use of runes, but when we exited to a large forested area, something was strange. We started walking, but the area seemed to shift rather than our position. It was somewhat obvious because the city that we were in was on a small island, and because my ability to bypass this by making a portal was being suppressed. The terrain was getting simpler too. At the start of our attempt to walk outside the city, we saw craggy mountains, lush forests, and a beautiful coastline near this commercial center. The mountains began to disappear, so Seishi and I originally thought maybe we had walked away from their sight, but we didn't seem to be leaving the coastline or approaching anything. Then the trees faded away, one by one. In addition to the land losing detail, the sky and sea went from realistic detail to a strange washed-out almost watercolor tone. The color of the also changed from a beautiful azure to an eerie tone of amber cast with blackest pitch. The sky also opened up. No, it didn't start raining. The line of black appeared, and rent the sky from top to bottom. The abyss of darkness widened. A Gate!

Seishi didn't seem to expect anything wrong was from the look on her face, but this was too strange to be coincidental. Bosatsu, or worse, was liable to punish us for our recent mistakes.

**Seishi**

Yomi looked concerned about something. Holding her hand, I pulled her with me into the Gate. Within this black void were Maintenance groups working hard to repair glitches and lost strings of code that riddled the unseen world. "Ah good!" I said, "If Maintenance is here, the problem should be addressed quickly." Yomi looked at me strangely, as though I was woefully ignorant of something blatantly obvious. Rinne also stared at me. "What?" I asked. The both of them groaned.

At some point after Maintenance whistled for security but before they showed up in force, Rinne carefully explained that perhaps the fact that we had caused the Monster named Obej'deni to come to life, or years of high infant mortality, might have something to do with this small army of Security hoping to delete us from existence. I honestly wasn't sure if they could, actually. Security could deal with a number of beings that were otherwise immortal, but at the same time couldn't even deal with one human soul. Probably why there was so much evil in the world. Until people developed into decent beings, souls would simply keep generating spirits and bodies for themselves, all of which might continue on a lousy chain of karma for quite some time.

"Stop! In the name of God! ...You heathens!" exclaimed the

Security and the Maintenance. I tried to explain that we weren't in fact heathens, but believed in God as firmly as members of Security or Maintenance, perhaps more so, but this entire explanation fell on deaf ears. Instead, they surrounded me as per Protocol 34B concerning the elimination of upper level beings. This was a good enough form to deal with even archdemons and beings that otherwise were not mortal, but I honestly thought that Reapers were probably immune to even that. But there was always an element of doubt there. Security did get a double portion of God's power to deal with Monsters and even the Elder Formless (loathsome things supposedly not created by God, such as Cthulhu and Yog Sothoth). If they could dispense with something that was so overpowering that the mind could not even grasp it, I had to wonder whether they could really kill a Reaper.

My concern was never answered, however. The very next moment, Ambrosia was there. She didn't use a Gate, she didn't teleport, and I couldn't see the trace of any runes. One minute she was somewhere else, and then the next, it was as if she was always there. She yawned and asked, "Who called my name? Who took it in vain?" A member of Security raised his hand. Although sleepy, I could tell that she was peeved at having been awakened. That Security member was erased from existence. Not just their presence but I knew their name before, and now even their name was stripped away. It was only possible to do this because Security and Maintenance didn't have actual immortal souls. God set this universe up so

all living things had a portion of Godhood within them, and that part would retain even if God destroyed the rest. Security were some of the most powerful beings in the universe, but also the most expendable. "Now," she said, eye burning with passion and redness from sleep deprivation, "does anyone else have anything to add before I catch up on my eight years of sleep? Why was my name invoked, anyway?" One of the members of Maintenance gave a low bow, and explained, "Sir, I apologize for disturbing you." Since Ambrosia was God, she was always given male address, so people called her He and Sir and Lord, almost never She or Lady or Miss. The member of Maintenance, a girl named R4C431 continued, "These Reapers have as of late, not been doing their jobs. As a result of their negligence, a Monster was born in human form, and a number of early deaths resulted. This romance of these two needs to be halted for the sake of the system regularity." Ambrosia said, "Rachel," unaware that merely giving her that nickname actually obligated the powers that be to thereafter her an immortal soul, "I designed Maintenance and Security to keep the balance and keep the peace, respectively. But, much like a president of the United States being able to declassify anything he wants, there is no limit to the authority of the Reapers. But... you are correct that there is a problem here." Ambrosia addressed the two of us, "Seishi. Yomi. We do need to address this problem. There is a Monster who will later cause problems in the temporal world. There are too many people dying. You have become distracted with your feelings for each other. Even I cannot

destroy you, nor will I."
Yomi was confused, "I thought as God, you were all powerful. Am I mistaken?" Ambrosia shook her head, "Yomi, what is the one thing that an immortal God cannot do?" She responded, "Well, you certainly can create a boulder that you cannot lift. You just weaken yourself or something. Or maybe become human. So, I suppose it would be that if you are eternal, the only thing you could not do is put a permanent end to yourself. You can't commit suicide, no matter how hard life gets." Ambrosia nodded, "So, explain what the myths say is the origin of all that exists." Yomi thought for awhile, probably trying to reconcile multiple legends together. Rinne spoke next, "Well, in Jewish and Christian myth, they say that there was God moving upon the waters of a thick Void, and that God, ummmm you, commanded there to be Light, and it was so."
I continued, seeing that she seemed to be wanting to hear this exact story, "Right, from there, Light was divided into light and dark, and a bunch of other things were divided like earth and sea, sea and sky, living and nonliving matter. But why are you asking us about this?" Ambrosia told us, "I have told you that you and existed for pretty much all of eternity, correct? Well, before there was me and the Void, everything was part of me. I was always alone, because there was nothing that could be differentiated from me. I needed others to tease me, to love or hate me, because there was nothing apart from me. And so, I split off from the Void, and then I created Light. You are the result. You are my Light. I cannot

destroy you, any more than I can destroy the souls of living things, the First Materials, or the Unseen Realm. All of these have my very Spirit within them. I can only merge them again with me, or change them somehow. And so, I give you a choice. You may continue working as a Reaper, but you will have to give up your love. Or I will reabsorb you into myself."

Yomi, at this point, seemed uncharacteristically angry. She was normally too shy and regretful even to want to reap the dead. Every time she did this, she felt like crying. Where was that girl? Instead, I saw someone angry enough to murder God. Not that she could, of course, for reasons that had just been explained. "Like Hell! We will never give up our love! And if you try to reabsorb us, I will cut you. There has to be a better way." And then God clapped.

**Rinne**

Bosatsu was our leader for a reason. Even though God was technically all-powerful, there was something odd about Ambrosia. She could be deadpan, or she could get upset about random things that made no sense to any of us Reapers. And at one point, while Ambrosia was the mortal Ambrosia Brahman, the Oracle of Tao, she actually lost her sanity and started killing random people. Fortunately for the universe, she eventually got the therapy she needed. But dealing with her was very much a wild card. Bosatsu on the other hand, was very rational and predictable. This was probably why God subcontracted all of us, we seldom did anything too far out of bounds.

So I can't say that I was that surprised when Ambrosia clapped, announcing that the entire thing had been a test. "You two, if you consent, I will make you into human beings. But you will not be regular humans. You will remember your past. And a legend will be told of you known as the *Eternity Epic*. Your lives will be a constant struggle, as you remember each reincarnation, but circumstances will get in the way of your love until the day when you can finally be together again. Even so, will you sacrifice everything you are, everything you have to become something new? Will you become humans?"

I expected them to say no, to be honest. But Yomi and Seishi volunteered to this without a second thought. These two were hardcore. I would have just given up my romance, probably. Everything seemed settled now, so I thought I was free to go, and God would just wave her hands and transform them. But it was not to be. "Alright then," Ambrosia said, "you will need to destroy all of existence, and reset yourself inside it." I was astonished. Why would God destroy all of existence? She shook her head, "Never you worry, I have saved the data of all living things on this disk." She pointed to an old floppy disk. And by old, I don't mean a 3.5 inch floppy that stored 1.44 MB, I mean a 8 inch that could barely do over 240,000 bytes. I assumed that her compression system must be amazing.

Eventually, I nodded in agreement. "What does this entail?" I asked God. Ambrosia explained, "You are familiar with the Tree of Knowledge, correct?" Yes, I should be. "That was

Yggdrasil, the tree where all mortal life exists upon. The same tree that Seishi and Yomi made out in," I said as I pointed to those two. The two of them sighed, as she continued, "As long as this exists, the current perception of reality maintains, and you cannot be reborn. Be warned, the Tree is more powerful than any of you individually." I could not see how a tree could actually be a great threat, but then, I hadn't played *Final Fantasy V.* Ambrosia summoned the Tree to this area, and then a rousing battle theme named played in the background while we fought. I was impressed with how big a geek she was, especially since the game that "Battle of Providence" came from didn't exist yet. You had to be a pretty big geek to fangirl over a particular battle theme when roleplaying games weren't even invented yet to everyone else, much less *Bravely Second: End Layer.*

Yggdrasil began the battle by shaking its branches, causing apples the size of small worlds to fall at us. Ambrosia caught one and planted its seeds in a pot. It fairly instantly grew into a sapling, so I assumed she had a plan. So distracted was I watching her perform horticulture magic that I completely missed the roots of the tree wrapping around us. The rest had avoided this without much effort.

The giant tree started trying to suck out my energy for nutrients, using its roots to try to break me down. Not that it would work, but it was very uncomfortable being crushed. Yomi cut me loose using her scythe. Normally, the mere touch of her scythe would bring any living thing into death. Yet Yggdrasil was life itself. It only succeeded in making a

branch die while the tree simply grew new stems and leaves around the dead area. Even when she sliced at the trunk, it was too thick for her to cut through, and it simply sealed the cut area off, then grew branches around it.
Hmmmm. It appeared we were at a standoff. As Seishi kept Yomi in good health (while completely ignoring me) and Yomi continued trying to slash away at the tree, I realized this was going nowhere. We could be fighting this same battle for all eternity, much like Ra's battle with Apophis. Those two would never achieve what their hearts desired. Was this God's plan? Had she only been pretending to be on our side? Perhaps we had better think of a new strategy.
And so, while I mindlessly slashed away along with Yomi, I spent time thinking about what sort of power would defeat a truly immortal creature like this. And then it occurred to me. Our scythes and our unique weapons, each of these was like a puzzle piece. A portion of a larger whole. Birth, Death, and Afterlife. All of these combined to make the Six Paths of the Desire Realm, the pattern of life and death. My name, Rinne, meant "six paths." Perhaps this was God's plan, to have me take up the mantle of the other two. Or maybe Ambrosia was making things up as she went along, and didn't have any plans beyond letting us make our own decisions.
"Stop, you two!" I called out to the others, "Hand me your gear!" They looked at me like I'd just asked to borrow an expensive car, but after I explained, they began to comply. Not only their weapons and gear, but we all stripped naked. The other two were embarrassed and vulnerable without their

vestments, but I promised to be quick. There was some tension though, as while we were still immortal to the best of my knowledge, without our robes our bodies were as soft as humans and could be in a lot of pain from attacks, and seldom let them farther than a few feet from us. Not having to do things like humans (such as washing) meant that we didn't normally have to bother with that anyway.

I carefully examined each in turn, and realized that there indeed was a sort of metal clasp on each robe. It resembled a sort of disc in parts, each one part of a full disc. I joined the portions of the robe, and immediately a sort of light flew from us to the robes, blending the three robes into one, and merging the energies. Seishi's robe had been white, mine was a dull gold, and Yomi's had been black, but now the robe shimmered a golden color with darkness and light gleaming at every step I took. I felt like I was wearing sequins, but obviously I wasn't. As the other two had no clothes, God knit together fig leaves to make some knock-off Gucci and Dior outfits. Seishi was decked out in a white pleated Gabardine mini dress,while Yomi got Look 26 from the Christian Dior Resort 2013 collection. I'll say one thing for God, she knows her style. All of which was made from figs, of course.

In any case, I continued to examine these items. I concluded that merging the Sword of Sorrow, Staff of Love, and Mirror of Faith together would likely create the Regalia of Six Paths, which would likely give complete power over life and death. I was pretty such that this sort of item was too dangerous to be in anyone's hands, so after this was all over, I set to work

on scattering each as far away from each other as possible. The Mirror of Faith went to one of the Oracles that would train the Oracle of Tao, the Sword of Sorrow went to the angel Cassiel, and the Staff of Heart I kept. But I digress. I got to work merging the scythes to form a weapon worthy of me. This scythe could defeat any opponent with a single strike, reincarnating it into a mortal body. I suppose the only one it wouldn't work on is maybe God. But I imagine she had the power to make herself a mortal (at least temporarily) if she so desired.

I rushed forward, and with a mighty swing, rent the tree into four pieces. What had been Yggdrasil faded in an explosion of light, and soon all that was left was a large seed.

God smiled on me. "Go right ahead. You know what to do," Ambrosia said. I apologized to Seishi and Yomi if I caused them any pain for the scythe slice that I was about to do on them as well, though I was certain they would never remember it anyway. And then I swung, turning at a wide arc before striking each. I would remember this day forever, though.

Two children were carried gently in my arms that day as I made my way toward the Well of Souls. I replanted Yggdrasil, and watched as it quickly shot up, restoring all existence and all life. But as I dropped the two young souls that had once been Reapers to be born into the world, I knew that each would never remember me again. They would remember each other, as the souls of Reapers were ideally suited to dealing with the trials of life, death, and

reincarnation. But they would never remember me again. Just before I dropped them off, I heard what used to be Yomi ask me, "Mama?"
Reapers are trained to be impassive at even the most intense situations. We don't always manage, but it helps us do battle without restraints against the most fearsome of creatures. Yet after I sent them on to be born their first time, I broke down in tears. How could I deal with their return for eternity? These two were fated to be lovers in each life, and to die again and again. How would I deal with them never knowing who I was? Ambrosia put her arms around me. "This is what humans have to deal with," she explained. "It gets better, right?" I asked. She shook her head, "These feelings are hard. But I wanted them enough to become human. I cared enough about how these humans suffer that I wanted to do something. And you'll be the only Reaper in your team from now on. But the other Reapers are here, and I'm here if you need me." Ambrosia took the Sword of Sorrow, preparing to give it to her angel. "This Sword is a funny thing, no? It can deal out sorrow to a great extent, killing whoever gets stabbed with it. But you can literally feel that what it actually wants, to give people a means to see their dearest friends again." I suddenly felt an urge to take it from her, but I stifled it, since I knew it would do no good. What they were before was gone. "Life is sad for a reason. It's sad so that we turn to each other. Life is sad, but it is not hopeless. I have a feeling that things will resolve themselves," she said as she went back to sleep, restoring the fabric of reality as she dreamed.

In the next weeks and months, I set to work on my task, which was quite demanding. I split my scythe into three separate ones, because I wanted to personally guide each soul from death to the Afterlife, to being born in a new life. As before, the tasks of the Unseen Realm were not arranged in chronological order. I might get sent to a prehistoric period as readily as the distant future, to the old Earth or the New Earth.  I had always wondered why it was that we didn't seem to do our work in a particular order, unlike Chiku and Jin, and the others. Why did we sometimes go back in time to claim Hitler's soul when he committed suicide? Or to kill off individuals of a species when a larger mass of them existed. Weirder still, during some events, I remember having to meet up with the others, as for some reason, I wasn't there at the same time. Having just sent a man on to be reborn who had cheated on his wife and finally repented of it in the Afterlife, I was surprised to be sent on a routine mission to collect the souls of Trilobites. With over 22,000 species, this was a neverending task, since the entire species more or less died out, with the except of those that evolved into something resembling a horseshoe crab.  I had left some jobs some jobs to me Pales, since I was simply overwhelmed by the sheer amount of work I now had. How had those two managed? Well, I suppose we did have all the time in the world.
This job, Bosatsu had said, was mandatory. Perhaps he too had noticed how lonely and depressed I had been without my friends. And it was true that slowly extincting trilobites was strangely fun.

When I got there, though, I realized why I was sent there. Yomi and Seishi were there. I talked for hours with them, being filled with joy anew, and I began to remember something Engaku had said about the mechanics of time travel. She said that whenever I stepped into the same timeline as myself, the new me tended to merge with the other one, so that when I left the timeline, I would exit to wherever I came from. I realized that I would get to meet them as often as I wished, in any timeline where birth or death was frequent. And since there were deaths and births every moment of every day, there were quite a few places they had already been that I could visit again.

# EPILOGUE

### Rinne

Despite discovering that I could indeed see my friends whenever I wanted, I was nonetheless disturbed by a restless feeling in my heart. Even though it was in the past, I could see the love in their eyes, as they spent centuries and millennia together. It took them ages to see it, but there was something going on there even on the day that all of us were first assigned together. This was before the dawn of time, and so there was only God and us, before even the smallest grasshopper was created. "I am lonely," God said, "and you seven are too inhuman. I shall create a world with all manner of life, in order that I may know what it is like to be human." I was confused at this comment, as none of us knew what it meant to be human, but we began to appreciate our purpose

as God organized us to help him create all of existence, then reorganized us, with my friends and myself placed in shuffled time, while Bosatsu, Engaku, Chiku, and Jin were placed outside of time.

Our first conversation, oddly enough, was about what God planned to do with these humans. Yomi thought maybe he'd keep them in cages and perform experiments with them. "I think," Seishi said while pausing for emphasis, "that God made humans to eventually awaken them as immortals, so God could have a big orgy for all eternity! C'mon Rinne, give us a theory!" I responded, "Pervert," before explaining that I really had no idea, but would be glad if I got to chat with humans before leading them where they wanted to go in the Afterlife. To find out what they were like, what their life was about.

I got my wish. I was assigned to this exact task, and though it was harder than I thought, I never had regrets. But this day... things got personal.

Let's back up a bit though. After I was effectively stuck in the Reaper equivalent of overtime, working over a thousand hours every day (time is different when you're a Reaper), the powers that be decided that I needed frequent vacations. As such, I periodically visited Earth in different time periods in different forms. But over the next few centuries, the time period that I grew to love the most was the 20th century from 1982 to just before 2020. I was sitting in a subway, listening Soulmate on a music device, going by the name Elysium, and

wearing a dark cloak and with red hair. I didn't look that much different from how I normally looked, except for the addition of a nose ring and frillier gloves. And some makeup.

Anyway. I started singing the song, since it was the best on that playlist. I sang quietly at first, but by the time that I got to the chorus line, the song had resonated with me to such a degree that I was sing loudly (and probably off-key) and with more than a touch of sadness and bitterness.

*Incompatible, it don't matter though*

*'cos someone's bound to hear my cry*

*Speak out if you do*

*You're not easy to find*

*Is it possible Mr. Loveable*

*Is already in my life?*

*Right in front of me*

*Or maybe you're in disguise*

*Who doesn't long for someone to hold*

*Who knows how to love you without being told*

*Somebody tell me why I'm on my own*

*If there's a soulmate for everyone*

I got poked on the back, and my astral body nearly jumped out of my skin. The one that I borrowed to appear as a human. "Hey there,"said a stranger, "you seem to be singing that song awfully loud. Do you perhaps mean it?" I giggled.

Over the next hour in the subway, the man who introduced himself as Theo and I talked, gradually forgetting both of our stops (although, to be honest, I was on vacation so I had nowhere to go for the next few days). I explained, "It's just that, it seems like literal centuries since I have actually had a meaningful relationship. My friends became girlfriends, but yeah, there's nobody for me." Theo raised an eyebrow, "Would you like that to change?" I nodded, "Although... It's been ages since I've had anything like a date, if ever. I might be inexperienced. And I'm probably a lot older than I look so I know of things that are a turn off." Theo asked me what I meant by 'things'. I sorta kinda geeked out about the causes of the French Revolution. And yet, he was still listening. "Listen, I'd like to talk more," Theo explained, "but I have work tomorrow. Would you consider meeting me on 1am Sunday morning at the church near 1st and Amistad? After that, we'll go for a cup of coffee, and see what comes next." Damn. So, my vacation was over on Saturday, and I theoretically could make it again, but would have to wait either for another vacation (the last one was after centuries of work) or hope that a job led me near there. But in the latter case, I'd probably not have a full date. All people had to die on time, after all. And the journey to Afterlife took awhile too. The week passed, and I thought the entire time about the next time I would meet him. When you think about it, I barely knew him, but there was something about him that was very familiar. But as I had only temporary relationships with other humans, that was impossible.

When I returned to the Unseen Realm to pick up my next work order, I was filled with a sort of anxious distraction. I got the next ten jobs done in record time, but it seemed as though there was some problem with me not being as thorough as usual in the part where I explained to the dead where they were and what was happening. Not that it really mattered, as they eventually moved along into the next life. But some lingered, and others dealt with issues in the Afterlife. That I hurried them through wasn't forbidden, but generally frowned upon.

Bosatsu was my direct supervisor, but God acted as a sort of aloof general manager of what I did. I could never tell what she was thinking, and sometimes even though I worked hard, she would arbitrarily ask me to do some extra step. I usually wouldn't measure up to God's commands, but she seemed to expect it and take it in stride. So, while Bosatsu gave me an earful, God just smiled at me like she knew something. Did she maybe know about my meeting? I suppose she must, because God could see everything. But still... she seemed entirely too perky today.

It looked like the next assignment was pretty close to where I had my date. In fact, it was the same place. At the same time. And when I read the report of who I was supposed to collect, Theo's name was on it. "What. The. Fuck." I said. I arrived at the spot wondering what I would find. He had most likely gotten in a car accident on the way to the place, as it wasn't a place known for violent crime, but parking was pretty hectic.

They should have expanded their parking lot like they had planned to.

Sure enough, I recognized that smooth jawline, the short cropped hair, that fine nose. For some reason, despite having met him only the other day, I recognized that nose and that face. Where did I know it from though...? I stepped closer at the body lying near the street, pulling out Yomi's scythe to reap him before he turned into a zombie or something. I got within 3 feet of him when his eyes snapped open. I flinched and jumped back, falling over in surprise. I pulled out Seishi's scythe, fully ready to instead exorcise him if he was a zombie. I had never heard of this happening so quickly, but I guess there is an exception for everything.

"Relax!" Theo said, "I'm not a zombie." No, he wasn't reading my thoughts, it was just a coincidence! He stood himself up slowly, leaning on me. Wait, normal humans shouldn't be able to see or touch Reapers, not unless they borrowed a physical body. "Wait... who or what are you?"

He smirked. I am certain that I have seen that smile recently, but where? Wait...

"Theo... means God. And this location... they're lyrics from a song by Fray. *I found God at the corner of 1st and Amistad.* So, this was all a prank? There's no boyfriend for me, then?" I asked, outraged and disappointed. Theo's hair lengthened and turned blue. His buff muscular chest became breasts and narrow waist, and his hips widened while what was between his legs shrunk and disappeared. Her clothes changed not at

all, but this was definitely God standing in front of me. "Oh no, it's not a prank. Oh rather, I was messing with you, but not about that. I could see how lonely you were. It's not good for people to be alone, and I decided I wanted to be your 'boyfriend'. If you'll have me." After the initial shock wore off, I agreed. We went to church as planned, then toward the coffee shop, which thanks to a strange prank was blocked off four blocks away in all directions. I looked at her, and she grinned sheepishly. This contrived coincidence meant we instead wound up having a meal at a Chinese restaurant. In the days to come, I'd spend time with her whenever I got time off. But for now, this moment was enough. "By the way, what Seishi said about having orgies was spot on. I do want to have a personal relationship with all living things. And if it means sex, that's fine too." I nudged God, "Pervert." But anyway. These are the Tales from the Reaper. How I went from a simply strange being that God passed over to make real humans, to someone God loved. And someone who loves God back.